Afghanistan Gozargah: Discourses on Gender-Focused Aid in the Aftermath of Conflict

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April 2008

Abstract

This research addresses gender-focused international aid in Afghanistan in the aftermath of conflict, focusing on the period of the Bonn Agreement (December 2001 – September 2005). The investigation begins with a contextualized understanding of women in Afghanistan to better understand their role in social transformations throughout history. This history is in some measure incompatible with the discourse on Afghan women that was created by aid institutions to justify aid interventions. Such a discourse denied Afghan women's agency, abstracting them from their historical and social contexts. In so doing, space was created for the proposed intervention using a discourse of transformation. This discourse sought to 'empower' and 'liberate' Afghan women, yet implementation of interventions did not reflect such goals, nor the reality of the *Gozargah* (transition, juncture). This research illuminates the discourses animating gender-focused international aid in the aftermath of conflict in Afghanistan and the effects of these discourses on the gender order.

This political and institutional ethnography was conducted first through an examination of policy texts and media discourses, then through an investigation of program practice through the perspectives of policy-makers and policy implementers. The findings were then weighed against the perspectives and experiences of women and men in Afghanistan. This research employs a gender analysis to illustrate the story of an aid intervention, starting with how it was represented at the highest levels to how it was understood at the lowest levels. This story reveals that first, Afghan women have been neither 'empowered' nor 'liberated' because the discourse on Afghan women was not historically and socially contextualized. This is further compounded by aid interventions that addressed political – and highly politicized – gender concerns with technical aid responses. The result is that promises of strategic transformations fell short of their goal, resulting in unintended effects in the form of continued insecurities for Afghan women.

Dedication

For M&D: who humored my bohemian tendencies and held down the fort (read: paid the bills) in my absence. Thank you for understanding when I needed to go – and for letting me go.

For Ru: who might never understand my bizarre lifestyle choices but still is in so many ways the kind of person I'd like to be when I grow up.

For Beyt Shami and Haddadin:
who remind me every day why I love home.

Also for:

Almut: who gave me a good German kick in the *patlun* to get this going.

CK: who gave me a place to live while I wrote – and made it a home.

PK: who provided positive energy - and tech support.

Lynel: who kept after me to just do it - and to worry about the rest later.

Gretchen: who tirelessly read every word – several times.

Jo: who guided me gently in the right direction when I was going off course.

Wais: who kept me alive that first year. There is no Afghanistan without you, brother. You are missed.

Finally, for the Afghan women I've had the privilege to work with:
Yours is the most exciting, exhilarating (and exhausting!) adventure I have been on. Thank you for teaching me the value of humility, for sharing your ways, and for inspiring me with your spirit.

B'aman Khoda.
I wish you peace.

Table of Contents

I. Framing and Contextualizing the Research ----------1

- Research Questions and Framework

1. Introduction to the Afghan Context
   - Why Afghanistan?
   - Afghan Women and Men Today
2. Operationalizing Key Concepts
   - Aid in the Aftermath
   - The Gender Order
3. Historical Overview of Women in Afghanistan
   - Modernization and Modernity
   - Women's Honor
   - Enter International Community
4. A Series of 'Events'
   - The Bonn Process
   - Post-Bonn Processes
   - The Aid Apparatus in Perspective
5. Methodology and Structure
   - Structure of the Thesis

II. Theories of Transformation and the Gender Order ----------28

1. Formulation: Theories of the Gender Order and Discourses on Women
   - Patriarchy and the Gender Order
2. Interpretation: Transformation of the Gender Order
   - The 'Empowerment' Act
   - An Afghan Feminism
3. Implementation: Technical or Political Interventions
4. Unintended Effects

Conclusions

III. Gender Policy on Paper: Transformation in Texts ----------50

1. Trends and Themes
   - The GAG, the AGG, and the GSG
   - Themes for Analysis
2. Policy Formulation: International Textual Analysis
   - UNAMA
   - USAID
     - Women's Resource Centers
   - UNIFEM
   - UNDP
   - World Bank
3. Policy Formulation: Afghan Textual Analysis
   - The Interim Afghanistan National Development Strategy
   - The National Action Plan for Women in Afghanistan
4. Analysis

Conclusions

IV. Discourses, Discussions, Images, and Perceptions ----------82

1. International Perceptions
    - 'Liberation' and the Media Narrative
    - Literature on Afghan Women
        - Campaign Against the 'Body Bag'
    - Popular Perceptions of Afghan Women
    - Can We See 'Beneath the *Bourka*' Yet?
2. Afghan Perspectives on the Aid Apparatus
    - *Chaddari* Politics

Conclusions

V. Gender Policy in Practice: Formulation, Interpretation, Implementation ----------102

1. Policy Formulation: Gender in Social Context
    - Animating 'Gender' in the Aid Apparatus
    - Opportunity Lost: Reaching Out to Men
2. Policy Interpretation: Afghan Women's Agency and the Myth of Liberation
    - Agency Denied
    - An Agenda of Social Change
    - A Democratic and Gender-Sensitive State
3. Policy Implementation: Practical Solutions
    - Gender Anti-Politics
    - Poultry Projects for 'Empowerment'
    - Practical and Strategic Interventions
    - Measuring Empowerment

Conclusions

VI. Identity Markers and the Gender Order ----------130

1. An Identity in Crisis
    - Afghan Identities
    - The Role of Islam
    - *Afghaniyat* and Other Markers
2. Sex and Gender
    - *Nang*: Women
    - *Namoos*: Men
4. *Mamus*: Roles and Relations
    - The Gender Order in Historical Perspective
    - Changes
    - Common Themes

Conclusions

VII. Honor, Agency, Aid ----------156

1. Honor
    - Defending the *Pashtunwali*
    - *Ghayrat*: Protection of Honor
2. Agency
    - Strength and Resilience
3. Aid
    - On Afghan Terms

4. Engagement with Men
    - *Dar be Dar*: Are Men Included?
    - This Road Leads to Turkestan
    - Alam, Aman, and Ahmadi: Men Speak Out
5. Implications at Family and Community Levels
    - *Inja Afghanistan Ast*: Profiles of Women and Couples

Conclusions

VIII. Effects of Discourses on the Gender Order ----------184

1. Violence in Afghanistan's Aftermath
2. Understanding Violence in the Aftermath
    - Data and Assumptions
    - Forms and Patterns
    - Other Countries and Cases
3. Evidence of Violence as an Unintended Effect
    - Perceptions
    - Afghan Voices on Violence
    - Documented Cases

Conclusions

IX. Ideological Occupations and Gender Anti-Politics in the Aftermath ----------206

1. Roles, Relations, and Opportunities
    - What Space Does Conflict Create?
2. Interventions, Implications, and Occupations
    - Understanding Context
    - A New Occupation of Afghanistan
    - Continued Insecurities
        - *Shabnam*: Increased Insecurity in Education
    - Back to the Beginning
3. The Personal is Still Political
    - Freedom for Women: Only Words
    - Possible Avenues for Future Research

Appendices

1. Methodology ----------230

- Qualitative Case Study
- Setting

1. Methods Used
    - Textual Analysis
    - Discourse Analysis: Media and Literature
    - Questionnaire and Focus Group
    - Interviews with Policy-Makers
    - Interviews with Policy Implementers
    - Interviews with NGO Leaders
    - Focus Groups
    - Interviews with Afghan Women and Men
    - Interviews with Specialists
    - Workshops and Presentations

- Ethnographic Field Notes and Reflexive Journal

2. Positionality and Challenges
   - Situating Myself
   - Language
   - Safety and Security
   - Human Subjects Protocol
3. Table of Methods

2. Mini Case Study: Advancing the 'Gender Agenda' Through the Parliamentary Elections----------258

- An Insider's View
- Intimidation of Female Candidates
- Afghan Perspectives
- Post-Elections

3. Profiles of Couples ----------274

4. *Maida, Maida*: Women's Life Stories ----------278

5. Women's Life Histories ----------286

6. Closing the Feedback Loop ----------290
- Afghan Voices
- A Final 'Gender' Meeting
- Lessons Learned?

7. Publications and Presentations ----------306

8. Dari Terminology ----------309

9. Acronyms and Abbreviations ----------311

Bibliography ----------313

List of Tables

1. Social Indicators 9
2. Peacekeeper Support per Capita 24
3. Ranking Aid Documents 78
4. Ranking Gender Documents 79
5. Identity Ranking – Women 137
6. Identity Ranking – Men 137
7. Identity Ranking – Women and Men 142
8. Comparison Between Women and Men Across Three Themes 178
9. Comparison Across Groups and Themes 181
10. Demographic Data for Afghan Women 248
11. Demographic Data for Afghan Men 248
12. Table of Methods 257

CHAPTER I: Framing and Contextualizing the Research

> *From the dry and objective tone of official UN reports to the anger of journalists and feminists shouting 'gender apartheid', one thing is clear: the world failed Afghan women for six solid years, and this neglect has direct outcomes... Extreme caution should be taken not to make the same mistake twice.*
> (Nassery 2004: 5)

This research addresses gender-focused international aid[1] in Afghanistan in the aftermath of conflict, beginning in late 2001[2]. This is the story of an aid intervention – how it is represented at the highest levels to how it is understood at the lowest levels. This aid intervention is one historical moment in an ongoing institutional process. This story reveals that such interventions are political processes – with political outcomes.

To illustrate this, the investigation begins with a contextualized understanding of women in Afghanistan to better understand their role in social transformations historically. The first argument advanced is that this history is in some measure incompatible with the discourse[3] on Afghan women that was created by aid institutions[4] to justify aid interventions[5]. It is argued that this latter discourse has denied Afghan women's agency, abstracting them from their historical and social contexts. Aid sought to 'empower' and 'liberate' Afghan women, yet implementation of interventions did not reflect such goals. Illuminating the discourses that animated gender-focused international aid in the aftermath of conflict in Afghanistan might present one way to understand what effects these discourses might have had on the gender order. This is the primary argument of this research.

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[1] I have elected to employ the term 'aid' to encompass both relief and development work as the lines between them are often indistinct in the context of conflict and the aftermath. I have employed the term 'development' to a lesser extent as I believe, in line with Ferguson, that the concept (in quotations) is one that needs to be problematized in and of itself and is subject to varying definitions. Both aid and development as concepts are employed as interpretive grids through which we come to understand the contexts of poverty. I do not assume that there are uniform interpretations of this grid - or of its varying outcomes. Ferguson, J. (1994). The Anti-Politics Machine: "Development", Depoliticization, and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press.

[2] The period of conflict in Afghanistan began with Soviet occupation in 1979, ending with the fall of the Taliban in late 2001. In using this periodization I am aware that beyond the end of formal warfare, conflict persists.

[3] I define discourse as "a *system* of language which draws on a particular terminology and encodes specific forms of knowledge" Tonkiss, F. (1988). Analysing Discourse. Researching Society and Culture. C. Seale. California, Sage.

[4] For these purposes, aid institutions include international relief and development organizations (such as those of UN agencies and international NGOs). The term does not include local Afghan organizations unless specified.

[5] For these purposes, aid interventions refer to the policies and programs of aid institutions.

There is also a more tentative secondary argument, namely that these said aid interventions have actually made life more difficult for women, and that such difficulties might have been avoided if a more nuanced and sensitive approach had been taken. However, this constitutes a sub-argument because a causal relationship between aid interventions and the hardship experienced by women is very difficult to establish. Nevertheless, there are elements of my analysis that potentially support what is commonly known as the 'backlash' phenomenon, highlighted in the literature on other conflict aftermaths, which points to the difficulties faced by women in such circumstances[6]. Similar experiences are demonstrated in the thesis through the voices of Afghans – particularly Afghan men – throughout giving credence to the approach, although a direct causal relationship is in no way claimed for the present research.

It is through these Afghan voices that this thesis makes its main contribution. This research also adds to the gender policy discourse, particularly through discussions with Afghan men on gender issues, social change, and aid effectiveness. In addition, this research tests Western[7] development constructs in an Afghan setting. Gender analysis is only one part of the story. This research is about aid policy – about what is said as much as what is not said. This discussion of the effects of aid could present lessons for policy and programming. Finally, it reveals that Ferguson's theory of anti-politics can be viewed through a gender lens – and is therefore applicable to Afghanistan.

This study is conducted first through an examination of policy texts and media discourses, then through an investigation of program practice, drawing on the perspectives of policy-makers and policy implementers[8]. The findings are then weighed against perspectives and experiences of women and men in Afghanistan. 2007 - five years into the reconstruction of Afghanistan - is an opportune time to begin a discussion of the effects of gender-focused

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[6] Donna Pankhurst speaks well to this. See Pankhurst, D. (2007). Gender Issues in Post-War Contexts: A Review of Analysis and Experience, and Implications for Policies. Peace Studies Papers. Bradford, UNRISD and University of Bradford.

[7] Similar to Kensinger, I use the terms West and Western to loosely define the European and American hegemonic constructions of culture, ideas, and politics. This should not be taken as an assumption that the 'Western' perspective is a uniform one, rather that it is perceived as uniform from the perspective of Afghans. Kensinger, L. (2003). "Plugged in Praxis: Critical Reflections on U.S. Feminism, Internet Activism, and Solidarity with Women in Afghanistan." Journal of International Women's Studies 5(1). Building on this, I employ Robinson's use of the terms not intending to make broad geographic divisions but because there is a lack of other terms that could reframe the discussion to challenge power imbalances. Robinson, J. (2002). Introduction. Development and Displacement. J. Robinson. Oxford, Oxford UP.

[8] Gender policy-makers and policy implementers are Afghan and non-Afghan women and men who are heads of aid institutions, gender/women focal points, gender/women program implementers, heads of Afghan women's NGOs, and others.

aid for both women and men in the country and to examine the implementation of policies in light of the promised transformation of the gender order. Indeed, Afghanistan is facing a unique set of development challenges: poverty, insecurity, underdevelopment, limited human capital, a state lacking capacity and legitimacy, and an opium economy (Byrd 2007). It is in this context that the following discussion takes place.

Research Questions and Framework

My research is driven by the premise that gender-focused international aid depoliticized a highly political discussion in Afghanistan – and brought political effects in doing so. The process of depoliticization began with a discourse on Afghan women serving to justify a particular kind of aid intervention[9]. This discourse created images of Afghan women that did not fully match or represent their social, economic, and political realities. Interventions for Afghan women were designed based on this discourse – a one-dimensional depiction of a *chaddari*-clad[10] figure in need of assistance - with transformation of the gender order as the anticipated outcome. As one result of this depoliticization process, gender-focused international aid in the aftermath of conflict in Afghanistan has had unintended and unexpected effects.

To test this premise, my research is guided by the following presuppositions: (1) Policy formulation reflected a discourse on women that was not socially and historically contextualized (2) Policy intent was to transform women's position, yet policy interpretation resulted in a discourse on transformation that denied women's agency (3) Policy implementation reflected an emphasis on meeting political concerns with technical interventions and therefore did not manifest the goal of transformation (4) Depoliticizing gender-focused aid interventions can produce significant unintended political effects.

---

[9] I make the stylistic choice to refer to myself in the first person for methodological reasons. I am aware of the influence on the research of my own presence, enquiry and interpretation as a researcher and therefore do not want to obscure my presence and involvement through depersonalized language. David Mosse speaks well to the dynamic of social researcher as participant insider, engaging in both "social investigation and lived experience". Mosse, D. (2005). Cultivating Development: An Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice. London, Pluto Press.

[10] The *chaddari* is a full-body form of covering traditionally worn by Pashtun women in Afghanistan to mark the symbolic segregation between men's and women's spheres. Amongst non-Afghans, it is more commonly known as *bourka*. However, *bourka* is the Arabic/Urdu term, while Afghans use the Dari/Persian term *chaddari*. See Barakat, S. (2004). Setting the Scene for Afghanistan's Reconstruction: The Challenges and Critical Dilemmas. Reconstructing War-Torn Societies: Afghanistan. S. Barakat. Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan. I use the term *bourka* when it has been used by respondents, but prefer the term that is more common to Afghans.

Such understandings are more complex in theory and practice than these presuppositions may suggest. I recognize that attempts to problematize the workings of the aid apparatus[11] in Afghanistan through this research will likely fall short of the complexities of this historical moment. However, this work aims to shed light on causes and effects with the knowledge that the lines between the two are often indistinct.

A study of an aid intervention as a political process entails engaging with James Ferguson's work on 'anti-politics' from his study of development policies in practice in Lesotho (1994). Ferguson examined the aid apparatus as a social institution[12] in its own right, with a view to deconstructing development discourse to understand its effects. In this vein, I extend the concept of anti-politics by examining it through a gender lens in Afghanistan. This case study exploring gender-focused international aid is not simply a critique but rather an effort to understand what this particular approach to aid meant to those who were implicated in its social reality.

1. Introduction to the Afghan Context

Why Afghanistan?

History demonstrates the ebbs and flows of Afghan women's issues and fortunes. The women's movement in Afghanistan marks time, and tells the story of social change in a context where *evolutionary* change is repeatedly abandoned for *revolutionary* change (Dupree 1985: 14). Afghan women have received inconsistent signals from above during the course of history: at one time enforced modernizations and at another a reversion to traditionalism – with little time to negotiate these opposing changes. Today, they have lost the clarity that comes with traditional roles, yet they lack the resources to seize so-called modern opportunities (Dupree 2004: 327). Reforms repeatedly flood Afghanistan faster than the country can absorb them, should it choose to do so. Lacking local foundations and popular demand, present-day reforms can only be imposed as they have been throughout Afghan history, from the top down (Centlivres-Demont 1994: 339).

[11] For these purposes, the aid apparatus refers to aid institutions, aid interventions, and the discourses surrounding them.

[12] I define institutions as the rules that govern behavior in economic, social, and political systems and organizations at the local, national, and international levels. Crisis States Programme (2001). Crisis States Programme Concepts and Research Agenda. London, London School of Economics Development Research Center.

At the level of rhetoric, Afghanistan can be viewed as one of the largest gender-focused aid interventions. It has been argued that the aid apparatus has been repeatedly employed throughout Afghan history to showcase the country as a success for aid institutions (UNDP and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2004: 208). At the level of action, however, such opportunism has done little for Afghans. Despite the rhetoric, it has been argued repeatedly that "the international community, led by the United States, has consistently failed to provide the economic, political, and military support necessary for security the most basic rights of the Afghan people" (Human Rights Watch 2006: 3). Many Afghan women argue that their cause has been manipulated for political reasons, they lack genuine and sustained support, and external pressures to fast-track gender equality would foment a backlash (Sultan 2005: 26).

The UNDP 2004 Afghanistan Human Development Report states unequivocally that the engagement of the aid apparatus in Afghanistan did not begin based on an analysis of real needs or a carefully planned process. "On the contrary," the report states, "it was initiated by external actors as part of a rushed reaction to the sequence of events that followed September 11th, 2001" (UNDP and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2004: 211). The aid apparatus successfully marketed its interests and priorities in the Afghan project "with little reference to evidence" (UNDP and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2004: 211). As a result, priorities that were determined were actually supply-driven based on aid biases, thereby perpetuating "the perception that aid is to sustain the presence of a large international community" (UNDP and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2004: 214).

Aid interventions added their gender-focused messages to the series of political and social experiments in Afghanistan granting women rights from above and then subsequently stripping them away. And yet, some women have gained strength through these vacillating initiatives, others as a result of economic necessity. Most Afghan women, however, cannot

At the level of rhetoric, Afghanistan can be viewed as one of the largest gender-focused aid interventions. It has been argued that the aid apparatus has been repeatedly employed throughout Afghan history to showcase the country as a success for aid institutions (UNDP and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2004: 208). At the level of action, however, such opportunism has done little for Afghans. Despite the rhetoric, it has been argued repeatedly that "the international community, led by the United States, has consistently failed to provide the economic, political, and military support necessary for security the most basic rights of the Afghan people" (Human Rights Watch 2006: 3). Many Afghan women argue that their cause has been manipulated for political reasons, they lack genuine and sustained support, and external pressures to fast-track gender equality would foment a backlash (Sultan 2005: 26).

assume this traditionally-male role. In studies of the Afghan family, Nancy Hatch Dupree[13] was among the earliest to ask: "Do men feel emasculated because women are more self-sufficient? Much emphasis has been placed on the rights of women. It is time to pay attention to what is happening to the dignity of men" (2004: 328).

This research therefore seeks to understand what the changes in Afghanistan's aftermath have meant to Afghans in terms of their own sense of identity and their relationships. It also aims to illuminate their perceptions and experiences in engaging with the aid apparatus. This work hopes to present a counter to the abounding preference for simplistic impressions of Afghans. Exposing the context's complexities makes it harder for the aid apparatus to sell their particular political project.

Afghan Women and Men Today

In late 2001, Afghan women's human rights and wellbeing were at the top of the aid apparatus agenda. Despite good intentions and strong words, in 2004 these issues were an afterthought (Human Rights Watch 2004: 4). Expectations – overly high at the outset – have not been met. Progress has been slow, and, according to a 2007 World Bank report, "in some areas important progress during the first two-three years was followed by slowdown, drift, or backsliding – adversely affecting future prospects" (Byrd 2007). Women have suffered disproportionately from these adverse effects. Afghan women continue to be among the worst off in the world in virtually all aspects of life - health, education, poverty, literacy, civil and political rights, protection against violence, and public participation.

The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) report lists obstacles that women are facing in present-day Afghanistan: tradition, lack of available services, economic constraints, inability to take initiative and manage their own affairs, family obstacles, domestic violence, patriarchy, and illiteracy (AIHRC 2007).

In the health sector, Afghan women have a life expectancy that is at least 20 years shorter than most other women in the world. Afghanistan's Maternal Mortality Ratio, estimated at

[13] Nancy Hatch Dupree is one of the foremost authorities on Afghanistan. She has directed the ACBAR (Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief) Resource and Information Centre in Peshawar since 1989. She is the author of six guidebooks on Afghanistan and has published over 150 articles on Afghanistan. Her husband, the late Louis Dupree, was a prominent anthropologist and Afghanistan specialist. No research on Afghanistan is complete without referencing the Duprees' work.

1,600 to 1,900 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births, is one of the highest in the world (UNFPA 2005). Each Afghan woman will have approximately 6.6 children during her childbearing years. This is nearly one third higher than even the least developed countries' average of 5.02 children per woman (United Nations 2005). One million new Afghans are added to the population every year – onto an increasingly-weakening economic and social infrastructure.

Afghanistan ranks far below its neighbors with respect to literacy, especially for adult females. AIHRC elaborates that female education is impeded by a lack of available schools, security concerns, poverty, and "widespread gender discrimination in society's customary practices" (AIHRC 2007)[14].

Despite recent progress in women's political participation, women are still a minority in public life and are often marginalized in policy-making and decision-making. There is a general lack of awareness of women's rights and certain vestiges of inequality remain in some laws of the country[15]. A mini case study on advancing the 'gender agenda' through parliamentary elections can be found in the appendices.

Afghanistan and Afghan women fall at the bottom of global poverty indices - with a Human Development Index value of 0.346 and a Gender Development Index value of 0.300, ranking Afghanistan as fifth and third lowest in standard of living and gender disparity in standard of living, respectively, in the world (UNDP and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2004). The average per capita income is less than $200, and only 13.5% of families have access to a sustainable source of income (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan and UNDP 2005; AIHRC 2006).

Livelihoods are deteriorating. A context of prolonged war, continued conflict, and periodic drought has increased poverty and vulnerability, particularly in urban areas. Poverty has brought increased corruption, posing yet another risk to an already precarious and steadily deteriorating security situation. Displacement and urbanization have brought a transition from a largely agricultural economy to one where livelihoods are precarious and daily survival is tantamount. As a result, women continue to enter a variety of fields in order to support their families, the most dangerous of which is opium production (Rostami-Povey

[14] Chapter IX provides further information on constraints to female education.
[15] This section was adapted from the first draft of the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) of which I was the primary author. Subsequent drafts and the final product were authored by UNIFEM.

2007: 58). Women are engaged in livestock and agricultural work and micro-enterprises, yet they lack access to capital, information, technology and markets.

In urban areas, Afghans have very little access to basic services and social infrastructure. A report from the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) attributes this to limited resources and authorities' unwillingness and lack of capacity to meet people's needs (Beall and Schutte 2006: 1). As a result, most of Afghanistan's urban population has no choice but to enter into informal employment. Increased vulnerabilities due to irregular incomes forces women to supplement the income – at times through exploitative and hazardous work (Beall and Schutte 2006: 2).

The increased poverty has forced more women into sex work (Rostami-Povey 2007: 1). The number of widows and female-headed households continues to increase. Their situation is far more serious because households with male labor are still better off than those without (Beall and Schutte 2006: 2).

Afghan women continue to experience violence and threats of violence at home and in public spaces. Domestic violence and self-immolation are also increasing, although emerging statistics remain unreliable. Both women and men expected more from the reconstruction process, and yet by 2007, hopes of peace, security, and development have been thwarted (Rostami-Povey 2007: 41).

> *With the US-led invasion came poverty, rural-to-urban migration, uprooting, crime, drug addiction, unemployment, alien culture: all these factors are leading to the breakdown of [Afghan] social relations as their basic safety net.*
>
> (Rostami-Povey 2007: 75)

Evidence from Afghanistan's Human Development Report 2004 shows that social indicators for women in Afghanistan are among the worst in the world.

Social Indicators [16]

Population

Total population: 29.93 million
Urban: 28.8% (Kabul population 2002: 1.7 million, 2003: 3 million) Rural: 71.2%
Population growth: 4.8%/year

Health and Mortality

Life expectancy: 44.5 years	Healthy life expectancy: 33.4 years
Child mortality (under 5):	260 out of 1000 (1 out of 5 children dies before the age of 5)
Infant mortality:	165 out of 1000
Maternal mortality:	1600 out of 100,000 (1 woman dies every 30 minutes from pregnancy-related causes, highest maternal mortality in the world)

Population without access to health services: 81%
150-300 landmine injuries/deaths per month (10 million landmines in Afghanistan)

Education

Primary education: 36% Girls: 21% Boys: 51%
Adult literacy: 28.7% Women: 12.7%

Poverty and Refugees

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

Human Development Index

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

Gender Development Index

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

2. Operationalizing Key Concepts

Aid in the Aftermath

[16] Adapted from (2004). Afghanistan National Human Development Report 2004. U. N. D. Programme. Kabul, United Nations Development Programme Afghanistan, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. Also see www.oecd.org/dev/institutions/GIDdatabase and www.unfpa.org/swp/2005/pdf/en_swp05.pdf

For the purposes of this study, I have elected to use the term aftermath[17] to define the period following a conflict. The more familiar term 'post-conflict' connotes an end to violence and a linear progression toward peace. In fact, post-conflict situations are circuitous and often entail a relapse into violence. For countries that have undergone long periods of warfare, the boundaries between conflict and so-called post-conflict situations are sometimes indistinct. Afghan history demonstrates that relapses into conflict are not unusual. Indeed, Deniz Kandiyoti confirms that Afghanistan's transition from war to peace is still incomplete (2005: 15). This is further reinforced by researcher and lecturer Elaheh Rostami-Povey who states that the term 'post-conflict' is not applicable to Afghanistan (2007:50). This research will argue that present increases of violence in Afghanistan are a manifestation of this dynamic.

Conflict can be defined as a complex socio-political struggle over processes of transformation. And therefore, the policies that guide interventions in conflict contexts are also political processes. Joanna Macrae of the Overseas Development Institute states that "humanitarian aid is now the primary form of political engagement" (2002). Attempts at denying the political nature of such aid only strips interventions of their political reality – making their application a mere technical exercise that has little relevance to local realities. Such was the case in Afghanistan.

In conflict contexts such as Afghanistan, meeting practical needs becomes a particular imperative as aid interventions focus on immediate humanitarian concerns. Research on aid interventions in emergency contexts reveals 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 (Anderson and Woodrow 1998). Mark Duffield notes that strategic actors can facilitate violence by failing to recognize the political nature of so-called 'political emergencies' (2001). Humanitarian assistance thus increasingly becomes both a political process and colored by political considerations (Duffield 2005: 15).

It is assumed, in the so-called 'relief to development continuum'[18] that conflict – similar to development – is a linear process. The progression toward peace is long-term, multi-

[17] The term aftermath is based on Meintjes, S., A. Pillay, et al., Eds. (2001). The Aftermath: Women in Post-conflict Transformation. London, Zed Books.
[18] For further information on this concept, see Ross, J., S. Maxwell, et al. (1994). Linking Relief and Development. Brighton, Institute of Development Studies.

dimensional, dynamic, and unique to each context (Lederach 1997). In Afghanistan's aftermath, programs transitioned from immediate relief to longer-term development interventions, yet political implications were further denied. The aid apparatus viewed the rising levels of violence, instability, and inequality in Afghanistan as part of the standard 'post-conflict package'. As one result, aid became conflated with security, and aid-as-security became the primary means of international assistance[19]. None-the-less, the track record of aid in reducing social risks and promoting stability remains unproven (Duffield 2002). Afghanistan represents a case in point. There remained an imbalance between short-term, visible interventions and long-term strategic interventions that change the ways power relationships are expressed as part of a process of transition[20].

Few aid institutions existed in Afghanistan prior to 2002[21]. This was due in large part to the difficulties of operating during the Taliban period and previous regimes. In the post-Taliban period, women's agency and empowerment were accorded significant attention in plans for the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Aid institutions poured into Afghanistan with women's issues at the top of their agendas. Improving women's position and addressing structural issues appeared to be the order of the day. As one result, programs failed to integrate a contextualized understanding of Afghan women in their plans.

The aid process in Afghanistan is said to have been "prescriptive and supply-driven, rather than indigenous and responding to Afghan needs" (Oxfam 2008: 2). Aid institutions in Kabul employed 'conflict experts' whose experience did not coalesce with Afghan realities[22]. This contributed to a failure to incorporate a contextualized analysis in interventions. International staff generally knew very little about Afghanistan when they arrived, and by the time they achieved a modicum of understanding, they were already in Iraq (Johnson and Leslie 2004: 207). Indeed, in conflict and the aftermath, the same people are rotated and the same partnerships are formed in a pattern of free-floating expertise that lacks context (Ferguson

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[19] Mark Duffield speaks further to this in his article: Duffield, M. (2001). "Governing the Borderlands: Decoding the Power of Aid." Disasters 25(4): 308-320.

[20] For further information, see Pugh, M. (1998). Post-Conflict Rehabilitation: The Humanitarian Dimension. Networking the Security Community in the Information Age. Zurich, Swiss Interdepartmental Coordination Committee for Partnership for Peace. Pugh uses the concept of transition not as a movement from relief to development, but to illustrate the change from overt war to (perhaps temporary) non-belligerence. Such a transition does not assume a particular end. Instead, it reflects a *process*.

[21] There was also very little scholarship on Afghanistan during the Taliban period (1996-2001). During this time, material was obtained from refugee camps or using secondary sources. Kandiyoti, D. (2003). Integrating Gender Analysis into Socio-Economic Needs Assessment in Afghanistan. Kabul, United Nations Development Fund for Women.

[22] Personal observation, 2002-2004. This is also reinforced by my own experience. I received no training on Afghanistan before being deployed to the country.

1994: 259). As a result existing disparities between local and international perspectives in Afghanistan were exacerbated by differing priorities regarding women's issues.

The Gender Order

This study uses the term gender order to represent the way in which society is organized around women's and men's roles, needs, and interests in various contexts. The gender order is a political process that changes and evolves – although it might appear resistant to change. The gender order is historically constructed and influenced by other identity markers. The term stems from Cynthia Cockburn's definition[23], meaning "power relations in any given society that establish a basic sexual division of labour, an initial social differentiation by gender that permeates and underpins all other distinctions" (2004 :33). I use the term gender order because it reintroduces the underlying power and politics that animates gender.

An examination of the gender order in the aftermath of conflict is particularly relevant as Afghan society is undergoing a process of transformation, one result of which is the fluctuation of gender identities. There is a burgeoning literature on women's roles in conflict and the aftermath, affirming that "'peace' involves a reworking of power relations, not just between nations or parts of nations but between men and women" (Kelly 2000: 62)[24]. No consensus exists on whether these new roles are, firstly, advantageous to women and, further, 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 et al. 2001: 152). While these changes in gender identities are largely indigenous, they can be supported or hindered by external influence, in this case aid interventions. Afghanistan presents an interesting case study in this regard.

The gender order merits deconstruction in Afghanistan because conventional gender divisions are not sufficient explanation for the fluidity of Afghan identities (Rostami-Povey 2007: 3). The use of the gender order as a category of analysis shifts focus away from women to examine the interconnectivity of relationships and entails a recognition that gender is only one aspect of social relations and is not the only source of inequality in women's and men's

[23] Cynthia Cockburn originally credits Jill Julius Matthews for this definition. For more information, see Cockburn, C. (2004). The Line: Women, Partition and the Gender Order in Cyprus. London, Zed Books.

[24] For examples, see Sweetman, C., F. Gell, et al. (2001). Editorial. Gender, Development, and Humanitarian Work. C. Sweetman. Oxford, Oxfam GB. Sharoni, S. (2001). Rethinking Women's Struggles in Israel-Palestine and in the North of Ireland. Victims, Perpetrators or Actors? Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence. C. O. N. Moser and F. C. Clark. London, Zed Books.

lives (Kabeer 1994: 65). Gender should be viewed as a *process* that continues to evolve in the context of Afghan social struggles throughout history.

3. Historical Overview of Women in Afghanistan

Much of Afghan history has emphasized geo-politics rather than gender politics (Moghadam 1999: 175), and yet the question of women's role in Afghanistan has been an on-going part of political discourse, linked to modernity and progress on the one hand and preservation of tradition on the other. Indeed, "Afghanistan may be the only country in the world where during the last century kings and politicians have been made and undone by struggles relating to women's status" (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003: 1). Afghan women's history is much more complex than existing formulations of pre- and post-Taliban. In fact, state-building, revolutionary change, and women's rights have always been intimately connected – with women's rights as the most politicized of the trinity (Moghadam 1994: 97).

In 1985, Nancy Hatch Dupree wrote: "for nearly a century there had been much talk – and some significant action – regarding the enhancement of women's role in society" (1985: 14). An understanding of Afghan women's history therefore could begin in the 1880s, when Afghan rulers of the period 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. Amidst various contradictory laws concerning women, the 'protection of women' was employed as a call for Afghans to expel the British: "Should these foreigners overrun the country, the men of Afghanistan would lose hold over their wives, for, according to [British] laws women enjoy liberty and under them no husband has any control over his wife" (Rahimi 1977: 36).

Modernization and Modernity

During the 1920s, women's emancipation began to play a prominent role in the nationalist ideology of modernization (Hans 2004). Popular perceptions of King Amanullah's immorality and excessive Western influence fueled a strong resistance, and religious conservatives and the rural population met his attempts at reform with violent opposition[25]. This is significant in that the rural population has historically presented the greatest challenge to social reforms.

[25] For further information, see Emadi, H. (2002). Repression, Resistance, and Women in Afghanistan. Westport, Praeger.

This dynamic plays out again in present day Afghanistan and is increasingly magnified by the rural population that is now displaced in Kabul city.

At this time, violence against women increased, perpetuated by those who considered women's families shamed by calls to abandon veiling and adopt Western attire. It is estimated that 400 women were murdered during this period as a result (McAllister 1991; Ellis 2000). *Mullahs*[26] circulated a rumor that unveiled women's children would be stolen by the Communists and made into soap. *Mullahs*, feeling threatened at the challenge to their religious authority, further instilled fear by claiming that natural disasters would befall Afghanistan because of the women's sins. When, in 1927, an earthquake did occur, it was blamed on women who had shamed their families and communities by removing their *chaddaris*. Women eventually succumbed to pressure and those who had removed their *chaddaris* donned them once again to appease religious authorities and regain their respect in the communities (McAllister 1991).

Emancipation continued to be enforced and subsequently challenged. Despite incremental changes, responses to women's rights vacillated between enforced modernity and conservative backlash[27]. And yet, attempts at modernity throughout history have always been imposed from above – with little impact on the lives of the majority. Such modernity has also been selective: so-called modern contributions such as technology and advanced weapons are accepted, while movements towards women's public participation in Afghan society are not[28].

Afghan women were officially enfranchised in the 1964 Constitution and later were given equal rights in the 1977 Constitution (Dupree 1996). The Saur (April) Revolution of 1978 introduced an aggressive program for social change, enforcing such modernizations as women's right to work, serve in the army, and choose their spouse. Mandatory literacy programs for women and the abolition of bride price were viewed as direct attacks on Afghan culture and honor, instigating yet another wave of violence (Skaine 2002: 17). Afghans felt a total disdain for their values, so much so that an Afghan woman said that the

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[26] *Mullahs* are religious leaders in Islam.

[27] For a thorough review of the fluctuations of women's human rights during various periods, see Niland, N. (2004). Justice Postponed: The Marginalization of Human Rights in Afghanistan. Nation-Building Unraveled? Aid, Peace and Justice in Afghanistan. A. Donini, N. Niland and K. Wermester. Bloomfield, Kumarian.

[28] Narayan also speaks to this phenomenon. See Narayan, U. (1997). Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism. New York, Routledge.

Russians deliberately "came [to Afghanistan] to play with the dignity of women" (Skaine 2002: 18-19).

Thus, 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). To most Afghans at that time, the government was perceived to be interfering with Islamic values and disregarding social traditions. It was further encouraging women to engage in public activities which were deemed "unladylike, ...undignified and detrimental to family honour" (Dupree 2004: 317). The Soviet invasion prompted contradictory changes in lives of Afghan women - emancipation and greater opportunities for some (a minority, largely urban), and death and destruction for others. The Leftist group in power during Soviet occupation promised full equality for women but did not deliver on it. Women might have been more visible in Kabul during that time, but they had no real decision-making or power-sharing roles (Skaine 2002: 17). In writing of the impact of the various Soviet decrees on Afghan society, researchers Weiner and Banuazizi describe it this way:

> *The alien ideological rhetoric with which these programs were imbued, the haste with which they were formulated, and the zealotry with which the local officials attempted to implement them led to a massive resistance among large segments of Afghan society.*
> (1994: 25)

They could also have been talking about present-day Afghanistan, and perhaps the many other periods in Afghan history where social change has been imported and imposed through foreign intervention. Thus efforts to emancipate women are not new – and have never been well received.

Women's Honor

Women's honor is the cornerstone on which the politics of women's rights rests. Social change and attempts to improve women's status have repeatedly brought strong resistance because of affronts to honor. These fluctuations in women's rights – enforced by the state's attempt to exercise centralized control - have actually led to violent, fundamentalist backlashes (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003). As one example, opposition to Soviet reforms for women – and concern for the symbolic value of women's honor - 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[29]. After the Soviet pull-out, however, "security for women became nonexistent, as their homes were invaded and their bodies were used as rewards for victorious soldiers" (Skaine 2002: 40).

In the 1920s, Afghanistan was a secular country working to extend women's rights, yet by the 1990s the country was a captive of religious fanaticism, tribal patriarchy, and underdevelopment (Moghadam 1999). Kandiyoti explains that Muslim fundamentalism grows in contexts of rapid social change, particularly as a response to colonialism and economic dependency[30]. This phenomenon combines with the international pressure that is exerted at the intersection of Islam, the state, and gender politics. As a result, the 'place' of women becomes "one of the few areas of relative autonomy left to societies whose ties of political and economic dependence severely restrict their choices in every other sphere" (Kandiyoti 1991: 8). Afghanistan repeatedly demonstrates the strong and yet volatile link between women's honor and external interventions.

Enter International Community[31]

> *Why has the status of women become a central issue in the west's perception of Afghanistan? ...Western public opinion – or at least the media (a valid distinction) – was hardly interested in Afghan women before 1996.*
> (Dorronsoro 2005: 291)

The so-called 'international community' and the Western media hardly took notice of the situation of women in Afghanistan until the fall of Kabul on 27 September 1996. It was the Taliban who, ironically, drew world attention to the situation of 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

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[29] The *Mujaheddin* (literally holy warrior) - US-sponsored freedom fighters - fought to expel the Soviets from Afghanistan. This period is known for its violence towards women in the form of rapes, abductions, and restrictions on mobility.

[30] Kandiyoti cites Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi as the inspiration behind these ideas. As one example of her work, see Mernissi, F. (1975). Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society. New York, John Wiley & Sons.

[31] For these purposes, the "international community" refers to the aid apparatus. I limit use of the term in that it appears to be a misnomer, assuming uniformity of opinion and behavior, in the way one might imagine of a 'community'. Regarding Afghanistan's official entry into the international community, the country gained membership to the United Nations on 19 November 1946.

simply a product of Taliban policies[32]. 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). Their belated 'discovery' of the discrimination of Afghan women (discrimination that passed largely without comment during previous regimes) is a reflection both of the political agenda and of wider ignorance of the realities of Afghan society (Barakat and Wardell 2001).

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 sphere of influence under the Taliban was virtually annihilated (Giles and Hyndman 2004). The Taliban were able to manipulate the deeply embedded system linking women to honor, issuing policies that "wrapped entrenched customary practices and patriarchal attitudes in the mantle of Islam" (Dupree 2004: 323-4). It is worthwhile to note that men also suffered under the Taliban, although this was hardly noted by the media[33]. Since the capture of Kabul by the Taliban, women in Afghanistan found themselves on the top of aid and media agendas (Dupree 1998). Underlying the logic of ousting the Taliban in order to 'liberate' women was the notion that, once the Taliban were gone, their stringent restrictions would be gone as well (Johnson and Leslie 2004: 82). Such facile understandings reveal the scant attention paid to abuses of women's human rights by previous regimes, and the absence of an understanding of Afghan women's history.

Violations of Afghan women's rights began to take on an increasingly prominent role in the justification of the US bombing campaign in Afghanistan (Charlesworth and Chinkin 2002: 602; Clark 2004; Rawi 2004). The Bush Administration's vociferous concern for Afghan women's rights as justification for military intervention was undercut by their support to the lawless factions that have repeatedly inflicted violence against women (Niland 2004: 79). As such, the military campaign was launched with little regard for longer-term social consequences. Alison Jaggar is one of many who believe that, following the overthrow of the Taliban, the US installed a weak government in Afghanistan under which women's lives remained precarious (2004: 13).

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[32] Contrary to popular understanding, it is important to note that the *chaddari* was not invented by the Taliban. Traditionally, the *chaddari* was worn by elite women in order to aid their mobility while retaining their modesty and respectability. Abu-Lughod, L. (2002). "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others." American Anthropologist 104(3): 783-790.

[33] Examples include regulations on length of men's beards and wearing Afghan-style clothing. The Taliban's domination over women was also domination over non-Talib men. The massacre of Hazara men in Bamiyan is a case in point.

The concept of rights - and the subsequent rights discourse - first became a part of the aid apparatus in Afghanistan with the release of the *Strategic Framework for Afghanistan* (SFA) in 1998. "Rights became the lens through which assistance was viewed, whether it was the question of humanitarian space (the right to assistance) or discrimination against women" (Johnson and Leslie 2004: 69). Afghanistan viewed the concept of rights as something to be handled within the community and social environment, not by individuals. Afghan identities are grounded in communal structures and continuously redefined by economic, social, and political currents. However, the SFA presented – and therefore negotiated - rights in a largely Western (read: individual) framework. It was thus perceived by Afghans as a language used by the aid apparatus "to define their own agenda in other people's countries" (Johnson and Leslie 2004: 76).

The rhetoric during this period was in terms of liberating, or saving, Afghan women (Abu-Lughod 2002). This high profile came with controversy – and without context. Afghanistan specialist Jeanne Bryer writes that veterans of other crises[34], inspired by the 'liberation' agenda, flooded Afghanistan in the early days of the intervention:

> *Many however, possessed little knowledge of the country, its culture or means of properly planning or implementing their 'projects'. Although the majority of the Afghan people appeared glad, initially, to be rid of their oppressors and had high expectations of improvements from the huge donations promised, it was not long before disillusionment set in.*
> (Bryer 2006: n.p.)

This politicized aid history has left the country a graveyard for failed fast-paced efforts by outsiders (Smillie and Minear 2004: 102). Afghan women engaged in aid activities were not comfortable with the high international visibility and felt that they were not consulted on campaigns on their behalf (Benjamin 2000). Many Afghan women are still struggling to find the space within which they can rectify this image.

[34] These aid individuals, along with war reporters, were often referred to as "emergency junkies" based on their careers built on moving from one emergency context to another. Many of these saw Afghanistan as an extension of their previous country assignments and were therefore able to revive previous professional relationships and programs with little regard for whether they were valid in the new context.

4. A Series of 'Events'

The Bonn Process

Afghan disillusionment grew in the progression of a number of 'events' offered to publicly reaffirm the aid apparatus' commitment to Afghanistan. The process of reconstruction was guided by the *Bonn Agreement*, a political timetable determined by international donors in Bonn, Germany in December 2001 to set in train a three-stage journey towards democracy: electing a transitional authority; adopting a new constitution; and electing a representative government[35]. The *Bonn Agreement* also established the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) - the weakest link in Afghanistan's national machinery - much touted but marginalized and under-funded.

The Constitution - adopted in January 2004 by the Afghan Constitutional *Loya Jirga*, or Grand Assembly - secured women's rights and ensured equality before the law, yet human rights and women's rights organizations have begun to identify fissures in the document where women's rights may vanish (Abirafeh 2004). Women comprised 20 percent of the delegates to the Constitutional *Loya Jirga*. These women secured the passing of several articles encouraging equality. Article 7 requires Afghanistan to observe the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* and all covenants to which Afghanistan is a party. This includes the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW), which Afghanistan signed in March 2003 - without reservation. Despite ratification, the Afghan Government has yet to submit its first annual report, which was due in March of 2004. Article 22 of the Constitution guarantees the legal equality of men and women. While it might be touted that women were present and active in the *Loya Jirga*, this should not overshadow the fact that these women expressed concern for their safety on the streets and at home in addition to the harassment they experienced at the event itself (Abirafeh 2004). As Kandiyoti articulated: "The scene seems to be set for the development of tensions between the "rights on paper" spelt out in the new Constitution and women's actual opportunities to avail themselves of these rights" (2005: 22).

In line with the Bonn Process, Hamid Karzai was elected President in October 2004. The final step in this process was the parliamentary election of September 2005. A discussion of the

[35] www.afghangovernment.com/AfghanAgreementBonn.htm

gendered implications of this event can be found in Appendix 2. 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 et al. 2003: 7).

Post-Bonn Processes

Following Bonn, donors met in Tokyo in 2002, in Berlin in 2004, and in London in 2006. In Tokyo in early 2002, conference participants renewed their commitment to the Bonn Process. According to the Co-chairs' Summary of Conclusions:

> *The Conference emphasized the centrality of restoring the rights and addressing the needs of women, who have been the prime victims of conflict and oppression. Women's rights and gender issues should be fully reflected in the reconstruction process.*
> (2002)

The *National Development Framework* (NDF), emerging from the Tokyo Conference, claimed that gender was to be a cross-cutting theme. In the paragraph to which gender was relegated, the report states that it does not want "gender equality to be treated as a ghetto", elaborating that programs must pay special attention to women and men, not merely including women as an afterthought (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2002: 13). The report further states that "because our women are often invisible that does not mean they are always excluded" (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2002: 13). Finally, the NDF advocates a "societal dialogue to enhance the opportunities of women and improve cooperation between men and women on the basis of our culture, the experience of other Islamic countries, and the global norms of human rights" (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2002: 13). This particular line is problematic because of its assumption of a uniform culture. Further, the experiences of Islamic countries are diverse and open to vast and contradictory interpretations regarding women's rights. Finally, potential for disagreement exists in the concept of global norms of human rights (Kandiyoti 2005: 20).

The following conference, in Berlin in March 2004, produced yet another tome. *Securing Afghanistan's Future* (SAF) renewed its commitment to gender issues, and strengthened the discourse to include more aggressive – and elusive - language:

> *The gender element is critical, given we are moving from gender apartheid to gender integration, addressing the capabilities of women in the culturally appropriate way requires special attention. However, as shown by the Loya Jirga, when women take on these roles they are accepted*[36]*, the key is not to discuss the role of women in Afghanistan, but to create facts on the ground regarding integration and women's roles.*
> (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2004: 14)

In January of 2006, 60 donors met in London to renew their commitment to Afghanistan and determine the next course of action. These donors committed military and reconstruction support for the country over the next five years. At the time of writing, of the $10.5 billion (over five years) that was pledged in London, it is not clear how much has actually reached Afghanistan. It is not surprising, therefore, that Afghans remain skeptical. Given their history of abandonment following the expulsion of the Soviets in 1989, Afghans are once again fearful that they will not benefit from sustained international attention in the long-term.

The Afghanistan Compact – the document emerging from the London Conference - is the successor to the *Bonn Agreement*, providing the framework for the aid apparatus to continue its assistance to Afghanistan. It is believed to be the last chance the aid apparatus might have to create sustainable structures. This window continues to narrow as donor fatigue, new emergencies, and low momentum set in. In terms of what has been done, the aid apparatus has fallen short as many have argued that reconstruction in Afghanistan was attempted "on the cheap" (Robichaud 2006: 17). Indeed, gender interventions present an ideal example of support 'on the cheap', where funding received was in no measure compatible with the level of rhetoric.

[36] This statement is problematic as women were in fact harassed at the *Loya Jirga*.

The Aid Apparatus in Perspective

A good start to an examination of such support 'on the cheap' is to trace funds allocated to the country[37]. From 2001 until 2003, Afghanistan received a total of US$4,262.3 million, of which 72.2% was channeled through the aid apparatus. Of this 72.2%: UN agencies swallowed 45.9% (US$1,957.2 million); local and international NGOs 9.7% (US$413.1 million); and private companies (largely American i.e. Louis Berger, Bearing Point, etc.) received 16.5% (US$705.1 million). The remainder - 27.8% (US$1,186.9 million) - of the total was channeled through the Afghan government (UNDP and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2004: 214). This was particularly problematic because the government felt undermined in its reconstruction and development efforts, therefore failing to achieve broad credibility in the eyes of the Afghan people[38]. Further, it is the responsibility of the state to safeguard rights – including women's rights – but its capacity to do so was debilitated by limited funding.

In the Tokyo and Berlin meetings, donors pledged[39] a combined $13.4 billion toward Afghanistan's estimated reconstruction needs of $27.5 billion over seven years (Robichaud 2006). However, by February 2005, donors had implemented only $3.3 billion in reconstruction projects[40]. More troublesome, however, is that experience in Afghanistan has revealed that the amount pledged is far greater than what is actually delivered (Roashan 2006).

Finding accuracy in figures proved to be an even greater challenge when attempting to extract what was actually spent on women and gender efforts. Significant funding had been committed, but there were no listings of what was actually disbursed. The US states that $72.5 million of US appropriations to the country over the last three years was earmarked to assist

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[37] It proved to be extremely challenging to find figures, and much less to find consistency in those figures. It was also difficult to access figures that demonstrated whether money was spent on actual projects or on overhead costs.

[38] For more information, see Ashraf Ghani articles and UNDP (2005). Human Development Report 2005: International cooperation at a crossroads: Aid, trade and security in an unequal world. New York, UNDP.

[39] Pledges are defined as statements made by government ministers or officials stating a serious intention to supply funding. Commitments refer to funds that have been committed (usually irrevocably) to a specific organization or sector. Disbursements are funds that have either been transferred from the original donor to the recipient organization or where funds are available to be drawn down by the organization. For more information, see Development Initiatives (2003). Afghanistan: How Pledges Are Being Turned Into Spending. Afghanistan Update. Somerset, Development Initiatives.

[40] It is important to note that these figures are not consistent across documents and sources. For example, another source lists Tokyo pledges as $4.8 billion, of which 72% was disbursed. See Ibid. I have elected to use Rubin's figures as he is an authority on Afghanistan, having worked closely with the Afghan Government. Therefore he has access to more accurate figures. Searches through the Afghanistan Donor Assistance Database resulted in no clarification as nearly all of the links to funding sources and lists of pledges were broken or unavailable. See www.af/dad/index.htm.

Afghan women (Sultan 2005: ix). ActionAid has slightly less optimistic figures, referring to USAID funds in particular. They state that 5% (or $3.8 million) of the nearly $75 million given in grants to Afghan civil society groups between 2002 and 2004 was devoted to women's civil society groups (2005: 2). If commitment to the Ministry of Women's Affairs compared to other ministries is any indicator, the situation is bleak. Of 41 national machineries, that of women ranked 32nd in terms of expenditures in 2002 and 35th in 2003[41].

Aid to Afghan women perhaps has been meager because the bulk of funding has been swallowed for the War on Terror. Since late 2001, the aid apparatus has operated with a narrow definition of security, meaning the dominance of armed forces. As a result, interventions to win "hearts and minds" actually sought to placate a potentially hostile population and not as a precondition for the realization of peace and human rights (Human Rights Watch 2006: 9-10). Further, when addressing insecurity is defined as a purely military matter, instead of adopting a broader view of security to encompass human security, women's concerns are relegated to 'softer issues'. This unfortunate omission was also brought to light in the recent Global Peace Index that failed to rank the most prevalent form of violence - violence against women - as an obstacle to peace[42].

Afghan 'hearts and minds' were certainly not swayed by the paltry aid they received compared to other conflicts. Significant amounts of aid in the first years of post-conflict interventions have brought relative success in other countries. Immediately following their respective conflicts, Bosnia received $679 per capita, followed by Kosovo at $526 and East Timor at $233. According to studies, Afghanistan received a meager $57 per capita in 2006 (Jones 2006). Other studies say that Afghans have received an even more dismal $42 per capita since 2002 (CARE International 2003). Regardless of the discrepancy in per capita figures, Afghanistan's lack of resources has resulted in a sacrifice of long-term priorities to achieve short-term gains. "This malnourishment at the formative stage has left Afghanistan today as a shell of a state facing daunting development challenges and an accelerating insurgency" (Robichaud 2006).

[41] This information was relayed to me by officials at the Ministry of Women's Affairs.
[42] For more information see http://www.rhrealitycheck.org/blog/2007/07/30/violence-against-women-not-included-in-peace-index

Further studies suggest that Afghanistan was short-changed in its allocation of security forces[43]. According to CARE's policy brief on peacekeeping commitments in internal conflicts since 1993, Afghanistan ranks lowest in terms of peacekeeper support per capita. The table below presents these figures in perspective:

Peacekeeper Support per Capita

Conflict	Peacekeepers (Pk)	Square kms. Per Pk	Population per Pk
Kosovo	48,159	0.2	48
Bosnia	62,000	0.9	58
East Timor	9,327	1.9	86
Somalia	28,000	11.4	212
Cambodia	15,991	11.3	727
Rwanda	2434	10.8	3,350
Afghanistan	4,800	134.9	5,380

(2003: 4)

To further illustrate the above point, a 2005 security study asked Americans to rank the importance of 30 international concerns: Afghanistan ranked last (Security and Peace Initiative 2005). The situation was aptly brought to light in a personal communication from an Afghanistan specialist on the condition of the country in 2006:

> *It is not good - I guess I expected that. Then, too, I checked out the Millennium Development Goals stats - updated in June this year - a very quick analysis of these reveals some terrible results. What are we all doing with this money and effort? So much goodwill, so many words but we seem singularly incapable of actually putting ideas and words into practice. We have lost the plot - we observe, commentate, wax lyrical, recommend then - what? Check again, write another report, tie ourselves in to bureaucratic knots to make people accountable but sometimes this results in a kind of paralysis. We can't move forward without a radical rethink - or rather redo. ...As I am writing to you I am feeling so strongly about our failures. I of course include myself in this - but recognition is necessary before you can tackle anything.*

[43] For more information see Jones, S. G. (2006). "Averting Failure in Afghanistan." Survival 48 (Spring 2006): 111-128.

5. Methodology and Structure

This study was conducted through an academic lens, building on four years of experience as an international aid worker in Afghanistan. My interest in Afghanistan began in 1997 through my work on Afghan women's human rights in Washington, DC. I moved to Afghanistan in 2002 to establish the Afghanistan office of an international non-governmental organization (NGO) – Women for Women International[44]. In 2003, I joined the London School of Economics as a PhD candidate in order to refine my thoughts, hone my analysis, and delve more deeply into my observations. I continued to work in Afghanistan in various capacities. My professional engagement with the country ended in September 2006.

Data collection consisted of textual analyses followed by interviews, questionnaires, and focus group discussions in Kabul with gender policy-makers, practitioners, and participants[45]. The study focuses on the period of the Bonn Process, December 2001 – September 2005, and builds on observation of and engagement with Afghan women's issues from 1997 to 2007. Additional information on the methodology is available in the appendices.

Structure of the Thesis

Chapter II will discuss four phases of aid in Afghanistan's aftermath: (1) Formulation, (2) Interpretation, (3) Implementation, (4) Unintended Effects. Formulation (1) begins with the concept of the gender order and discourses on women. It begins by deconstructing the gender order in the Afghan context socially and historically. It presents an understanding of how gender-focused aid might be formulated. The following section addresses interpretation (2) of aid, which was crafted with the intent to transform the gender order in Afghanistan. It seeks to understand what 'transformation' entails in practice. It is based on the view that aid interventions cannot transform, per se, but can support or hinder women's potential in achieving transformation through policies and programs. Implementation (3) raises the possibility that aid was implemented in a way that presents a disconnect between policy and practice. It examines the difference between technical and political interventions.

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[44] Women for Women International is an international NGO supporting women in conflict and post-conflict countries providing women survivors of war and violence with the tools and resources needed to move out of crisis and poverty into stability and self-sufficiency through a holistic approach of three programs – sponsorship, training in skills and rights awareness, and income-generating opportunities. For more information see www.womenforwomen.org

[45] For this study, I use the term 'participants' to represent those who might be more commonly known as 'beneficiaries' of aid interventions. The designation 'beneficiary' is passive and falls short as it does not fully convey the depth and complexity of the relationship between actors.

Finally, the section on unintended effects (4) proposes that certain effects have emerged as a result of the disconnects above. The theoretical framework builds on the work of James Ferguson, informed by Deniz Kandiyoti and Elaheh Rostami-Povey, placing their theories in the context of Afghanistan's aftermath with a view to examining the discourses surrounding gender-focused international aid.

Chapter III begins with the textual analysis of five aid institutions of high profile in order to examine their aid and gender policy papers in light of the above framework. These five institutions – UNAMA, USAID, UNDP, UNIFEM, and the World Bank – were selected because of their prominent role as aid institutions as well as their membership on the Ministry of Women's Affairs Advisory Group on Gender – the key players on all things 'gender' in Afghanistan. Afghan government policy papers are also analyzed as a comparison. A discussion of institutional support in the aftermath through the formulation of policy contributes to a better understanding of what was committed in terms of gender-focused aid and serves as a starting point to examine gender rhetoric. An analysis and ranking of these documents concludes the chapter.

Chapter IV addresses the specific discourses and discussions on women in Afghanistan that were employed during the period of study and that served to animate the aid apparatus. The chapter begins with a discussion of international perceptions through media and popular literature, tested against the perceptions of a focus group. This is weighed against Afghan perspectives on the images that likely led to the formation of aid interventions. The analysis of media messages and public perceptions underlies the rest of the research and leads to a discussion on policy formulation.

Chapter V illuminates the journey from policy formulation to interpretation to implementation through the voices of 45 policy-makers, policy implementers, NGO leaders, and Afghanistan specialists. Their experiences and perceptions are organized around emergent themes that are then checked against those of Afghan women and men. This chapter also brings to light the media messages that were discussed in Chapter IV and places them in the context of policy interpretation and implementation.

Chapter VI presents data collected from interviews with 71 Afghan women and 50 Afghan men on identity markers, definitions of gender roles and relations, and evolution of gender roles in different periods throughout Afghan history. It begins with an understanding of how

Afghans define and negotiate their various identities and what this means for the formulation, interpretation and implementation of aid interventions.

The next chapter presents an in-depth discussion of the major themes from interviews with Afghan women and men. These perspectives and experiences are then compared with focus group discussions. Chapter VII concludes with comparisons and implications at the family and community levels using women's life histories and profiles of couples. This chapter concludes by raising the possibility that violence against women could be an unintended effect.

Chapter VIII focuses on violence as an unintended effect. This in-depth view starts with a discussion of violence in conflict and the aftermath and presents a comparison with other countries and cases. The chapter continues with a discussion of perceptions of violence and concludes with a brief overview of documented cases.

The final chapter resumes the discussion from Chapter I on gender roles in the aftermath of conflict and what implications this might have for aid interventions. This chapter concludes with the voices of Afghan women and men and their views of what the future holds, followed by avenues for possible future research.

Appendices include a detailed research methodology (in Appendix I) as well as a list of acronyms and abbreviations and Dari terminology. In addition, Appendix 2 provides a mini case study to illustrate an example of gender policy in practice – the advancing of the 'gender agenda' through Afghanistan's 2005 parliamentary elections. Additional appendices provide illustrations of women's life stories as well as profiles of couples and feedback from specialists when verifying findings.

CHAPTER II: Theories of Transformation and the Gender Order

This research is grounded in development studies in that it seeks to argue in favor of social change and policy interventions. This research employs both an academic and a 'development' discourse on Afghanistan as parts of the story. The latter discourse retains its independent validity because it deliberately sets out to create space for its own 'development' intervention. In short, it justifies its own existence. The 'development' discourse is fueled by rhetoric which is revealed though its own texts and brought to fruition through its own interventions. This, in turn, is illuminated through the (perhaps contradicting) social realities that emerge and sometimes by academic analyses of the 'development' process such as this research.

This research employs gender analysis[46] in order to include an understanding of the roles and needs of both women and men in Afghanistan's conflict aftermath to understand what changes in the aftermath have meant to Afghans. Gender-relations frameworks help to establish an inductive analysis, grounded in a contextualized understanding of the gender order in Afghanistan. Such analyses might in fact reveal that boxes sexes are excluded in their own ways[47].

Above all, this is a study of an aid intervention. In this vein, this research seeks to examine some of the practical implications of theory to better understand what effects aid policies have in practice. Alberto Acre recognizes the "need for a sociology of development and a politics of social change that address the language cartography of intervention policies and their outcomes" (2000: 50). The term 'development' can be employed in diverse ways for strategic purposes[48]. Ferguson recognizes a distinction between development contributing to a modern society and development contributing to a better quality of life. Because these two are often conflated in aid interventions, it becomes possible to offer a technical response contributing to a modern society as an answer to improved quality of life. In so doing, a project for rubble removal becomes a part of an aid institution's contribution to women[49]. Kabeer explains it this way:

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[46] For a thorough explanation of a gender analysis, particularly in conflict contexts, see Mertus, J. (2000). War's Offensive on Women: The Humanitarian Challenge in Bosnia, Kosovo, and Afghanistan. West Hartford, Kumarian.
[47] For additional information, see Afshar, H. and D. Eade, Eds. (2004). Development, Women and War: Feminist Perspectives. Development in Practice. Oxford, Oxfam.
[48] To this end, I have opted to use 'aid' instead of 'development' as it avoids potential pitfalls in definitions and – perhaps ideally – carries less baggage in its application.
[49] Chapter V provides further details of this particular project as well as other 'technical' interventions.

> *Development planning is not simply a technocratic response to neutrally determined imperatives; it is also a process of struggle over concepts, meanings, and priorities and practices which themselves arise out of competing world-views about the final goals of development.*
> (1994: 289)

It is useful to trace Afghanistan's path alongside Sylvia Walby's approaches to political sociology as an initial understanding of the progressions of 'gender' and how they influence aid interventions (1988). She sees four phases of engagement with women and gender issues. The first phase entails the near-total neglect of gender, or the mention of women as an aside or footnote. This is followed by a second phase that exposes the flaws and fallacies from the previous neglect. The third phase adds women as a special case to compensate for previous neglect. Afghanistan sits here in its approach. Walby elaborates that this approach presents women's activity as exceptional and restricts gender analysis to women only (1988: 217). This third phase is limited in its view of women's activity as a deviation from the norm. In Afghanistan, this can be represented by the media's obsession with the few 'gender heroines' as an antidote to the downtrodden *chaddari*-clad woman[50]. Furthermore, this approach omits men as actors in gender politics "as if the existing studies take men as gender neutral and only women as gendered subjects" (Walby 1988: 223). Walby places her emphasis on patriarchal practices, but the contributions of male advocates and supporters - not just opponents - are crucial to advancing gender politics. Finally, the fourth phase represents the full theoretical integration of a gender analysis. This cannot occur until there is a body of empirical work that relates to both sexes. To this end, this research examines the gender order based on the perceptions of both men and women as key players, with a view to pushing analyses of Afghanistan into the fourth phase.

1. Formulation: Theories of the Gender Order and Discourses on Women

As a socially and historically embedded institution, the gender order must first be deconstructed and subsequently contextualized in Afghanistan to enable a better understanding of the operations of gender. In so doing, it will become apparent whether gender is indeed a relevant category in the Afghan context. Rostami-Povey argues critically

[50] Examples of these women include Masuda Jalal, Sima Samar, Malalai Joya and others who are popular with the media – whether they adequately represent Afghan women or not.

for a consideration of gender, agency, and identity – and how these discourses intersect with the discourses of class, culture, religion, and ethnicity (2007). It is these multiple identities – and the way they intersect – that was neglected in gender interventions in Afghanistan. Instead, a solitarist approach to identity was taken[51].

In aid parlance, the term gender is used to demonstrate commitment to women's empowerment and equality. However, static and technical understandings of the term strip gender of its political implications, resulting in isolationist and reductionist interpretations. In other words, gender becomes a politically neutralized euphemism for women. When gender is conflated with women, the language of aid becomes centered around women's objectives. While 'gender' is a political term, 'women' lends itself more readily to technical solutions. Projects that 'add women' often fail to understand underlying power relations and dynamics of social change (Afshar 2004: 1). Haleh Afshar argues for a nuanced understanding of gender, power, and politics in Islamic contexts. Fatima Mernissi has long challenged assumptions of women's inferiority in the Muslim world. Both Mernissi and Afshar are relevant in this discussion because they emphasize women's agency and indigenous feminisms in discussions of gender. It is in this vein that this understanding of the gender order takes place.

An analysis of the gender order in Afghanistan's aftermath can illuminate the ways men and women translate "broader processes of change into concrete gains and losses for different groups of women and men" (Kabeer 1994: 301). Such an approach contributes to an understanding of the gender order by serving as a reminder that the concept is dynamic and varied not only between men and women, but between different types of women. There is therefore a need to deconstruct the different understandings of the gender order animating the aid apparatus and how these understandings have contributed to the formulation of aid interventions around particular women's needs.

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 the gender order. Further, Kandiyoti advises that "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" (2003: 4-5). More

[51] Chapter VI elaborates on the discussion of identities.

profound analyses of and engagement with Afghan society could prevent women from being addressed in a social vacuum, allowing space for the creation of programs that complement women's realities.

Patriarchy and the Gender Order

The term gender order does not reflect a particular gender hierarchy, yet the reality in most countries is one of patriarchy[52]. Afghanistan qualifies as a part of what Deniz Kandiyoti might refer to as the system of classic patriarchy (1988). But Kandiyoti will also argue that it is insufficient to conclude that the gender order in Afghanistan is based simply on a Muslim model of patriarchy. An understanding of patriarchy is important, but other factors (such as class, ethnicity, and age group) may play a significant role in contextualizing the gender order in Afghanistan. Patriarchy alone is an insufficient argument and could serve to obfuscate the agency of both women and men. An understanding of gender inequalities in their cultural, political, and social contexts is therefore essential. These contexts are not uniform or static, but an understanding of these elements reveals one part of the picture that was overlooked in analyses of gender interventions in Afghanistan.

Walby also argues for an analysis of gender equality rooted in an understanding of patriarchy in context (1990). The concept is not historically static, but changes over time and has a relationship with other systems of oppression. However, Walby's analysis of patriarchy might fall short in the Afghan context as it does not fully engage with the differences in social positions of women in different cultural contexts (Moghadam 1992). Contrary to common understandings of patriarchy in Muslim contexts, patriarchy in Afghanistan is more tribal than Islamic. Tribal practices often overshadow Islam – particularly its more enlightened messages on gender issues (Kamali 2003). Therefore there is a need for a nuanced understanding of power and patriarchy that shows their interconnections (Abu-Lughod 1989). Abu-Lughod argues in favor of understanding women's and men's lived experiences of patriarchy – and how these change based on current political projects. Thus patriarchy – like the gender order - is a political process but also influenced by political processes.

[52] Sylvia Walby defines patriarchy as a "system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women". Walby, S. (1990). Theorizing Patriarchy. Oxford, Blackwell. I agree with Walby in that it is important to note that all men are not dominant, just as all women are not subordinate.

The gender order opens up the opportunity to understand if the institution of patriarchy is valid in Afghanistan and how it manifests itself in a cultural and temporal context. For the purposes of this study, I aim to illuminate the dynamics of patriarchy in the Afghan context, while recognizing that more broadly there are many patriarchies.

Kandiyoti, Jaggar, and Walby speak to the same concerns as those of Maxine Molyneux in their examinations of social change in patriarchal societies, where patriarchal controls are being eroded by socio-economic transformation, creating what Kandiyoti calls a "favorable climate for the emergence of a conservative backlash against the emancipation of women" (1991: 14). She puts this in context:

> *In Afghanistan, where there is a strong norm of male responsibility for the protection of women in the domestic domain, these dislocations may be experienced not merely as economic disasters and humanitarian tragedies but as normative and moral crises that demand regulation, sometimes through violent and ideological means. The contradictory effects of war and displacement on age and gender hierarchies in households and communities both unsettling and reinforcing aspects of patriarchal control, have yet to be investigated.*
> (2005: 7)

As Kandiyoti has articulated, Afghanistan is similar to other patriarchal societies in that its gender order is shaped by socio-cultural factors[53] largely based on women's role as keepers of the family honor[54]. Attempts to separate women from family and community are met with strong resistance. It is neither possible nor appropriate to refer only to 'Afghan women' since their plight is usually inextricably linked with that of their families (Barakat and Wardell 2001). Aid for Afghan women is perceived in the context of interrelationships (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003), however many aid programs in Afghanistan have focused on women by excluding men, thereby perpetuating an environment that has little basis in Afghan society.

An examination of the gender order also places men as a subject of analysis as they too have a role to play in gender order transformation. Indeed, Kabeer explains that while "the

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[53] In this case, socio-cultural factors refer to mobility and ability to work and earn income, amongst others. These factors depend on age, ethnicity, economic status, etc.

[54] For more information, see Centlivres-Demont, M. (1994). Afghan Women in Peace, War, and Exile. The Politics of Social Transformation in Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan. M. Weiner and A. Banuazizi. Syracuse, Syracuse University Press. Dupree, N. H. (1998). Afghan Women Under the Taliban. Fundamentalism Reborn? Afghanistan and the Taliban. W. Maley. London, Hurst and Co. This is further elaborated in Chapter VII.

terminology of gender, gender roles and gender relations has been widely adopted, its implications have not always been fully worked through. For some, it remains just another word for 'women'" (1994: xii). Similarly, in Afghanistan, gender has been conflated with women, and the language of aid programming has been oriented around women's objectives, without a broader definition of gender. This is not unusual in the context of conflict and the aftermath, where, "conceptually, there is still a great deal of confusion and debate about what this really means, and what are the real political and programming implications of a gender focus" (Jones 2004: 213)[55]. Political implications of a gender order and gender politics means that we must examine power among women and men - not just between them.

Walby recognizes men's agency in gender politics in that men can advocate women's struggles or present opposition to women articulating and acting on their interests (1997: 18). Jaggar would argue that women's experiences differ from men's interpretations and therefore that they could provide clues as to how reality might be interpreted from the standpoint of women. It is of value to examine the role of men, particularly in traditionally patriarchal societies such as Afghanistan, to better understand women's agency in its social context[56]. Rostami-Povey argues for a need to recognize the challenges that men face – and men's need to search for new identities and redefine masculinities (2007). Building on these arguments, understanding men's perceptions provides insights to their own interpretations of reality and to their perceptions of how social change is received – or resisted. This is at the crux of a feminist perspective on gender.

2. Interpretation: Transformation of the Gender Order

Aid is often conflated with radical social change (Hilhorst 2003). For aid agencies, their proclaimed target for women in Afghanistan was indeed such change. Rhetoric of women's 'liberation', 'empowerment', and other terms were used frequently to justify intervention – an intervention that was fueled by the propagated discourse on Afghan women. This is further magnified in contexts of conflict and the aftermath where gender identities are in flux,

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[55] Jones elaborates on the progression of gender and conflict, explaining that gender as a concept made progress in 1999 in changes such as the UN decision to incorporate gender advisors in peace-keeping missions and to 'mainstream' gender programming. This was followed in 2000 by the Windhoek Declaration and later United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. For more information, see Jones, B. D. (2004). Aid, Peace, and Justice in a Reordered World. Nation-Building Unraveled? Aid, Peace and Justice in Afghanistan. A. Donini, N. Niland and K. Wermester. Bloomfield, Kumarian.

[56] For a discussion of these ideas in an Afghan context, see Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, S. Ibid.Afghan Women on the Margins of the Twenty-first Century.

offering space for women to access new resources and claim new roles. As Afghanistan moves beyond an immediate post-war situation, aid interventions become increasingly conflictual and contested processes, as people negotiate priorities and resource distribution in an effort to secure their livelihoods (Beall and Esser 2005). In the aftermath, gender-focused international aid can play a role in helping women achieve greater security. I do not doubt the sincerity in seeking to provide for women's security - political, economic, and social – but interventions were hampered by inadequate understandings of the intersection of poverty, gender, power, and security[57].

To this end, one intention of intervention in Afghanistan for women was to transform the gender order. In theory, transformation is achieved by a strategic impact on the gender order, a fundamental structural change in gender relations that brings women closer to equitable relationships with men[58]. Social change and transformation move women from an oppressive present to a liberated future (Jaggar 1988). Transformation is a long-term process, working at a deep structural level to address gender inequalities. Transformation is also more than an outcome; it is a non-linear process to be put in place entailing consciousness-raising and women's agency. Indeed, the most important transformations are not simply introduced by aid interventions but are being negotiated through a complex process that involves all those with something at stake (Ferguson 1994: 281). In theory, transformation is not a difficult concept to grasp. Implementing programs that raise the probability of transformation, however, is not as apparent. Aid interventions themselves do not transform, per se, but they support or hinder women's potential in achieving transformation through their policies and programs. For the purposes of this research, I do not seek to measure transformation or to judge its success. Transformation in this case is relevant in that it was used as a discourse that was not matched in practice[59].

Discourses are sites where meaning is constructed and contested, and power relations are defined (Tonkiss 1988; Karam 2000). Artificially imposed discourses are not likely to reflect local realities. Such discourses guide interventions, or at least illuminate their intentions. Yet discourses do not operate outside of people's agency. People can negotiate and reshape

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[57] This builds on Deborah Eade's argument in her discussion of Rwanda. Eade, D. (2004). Introduction: Peace and Reconstruction: Agency and Agencies. Development, Women and War: Feminist Perspectives. H. Afshar and D. Eade. Oxford, Oxfam.

[58] I use the term transformation also to represent the array of aid agency terms that have come to have similar meanings. Empowerment is one such term. I do not intent to imply that the two are synonymous, but they are used in similar ways in development rhetoric.

[59] For these purposes, transformation in practice will be measured by political and technical interventions.

discourses, although they may be forceful elements in creating people's realities (Hilhorst 2003: 77). Discourses encompass multiple forms of social practice that incorporate concrete forms of knowledge, and thereby have real effects and consequences when employed (de Vries 1992: 84). A discourse on transformation can produce certain ideas – whether applied or not – that generate their own effects. An analysis of intervention should therefore include an examination of battles over the interpretation of images and meanings that take place at the interface between 'outsiders' (aid institutions) and local groups (Villarreal 1992: 264).

In the case of women in Afghanistan, language was used as a political practice to present a specific picture and to achieve particular ends. There is little existing scholarship on Afghan women's agency at the interface between aid interventions and women's needs and interests. An examination of 'transformation' in practice should therefore begin with an examination of aid institution's statements of intent in order to explore their performative effects and semantic qualities (2005: 2).

The 'Empowerment' Act

The *Afghan Women Empowerment Act of 2006*[60] presents a good starting point for a discussion of discourses animating gender interventions in Afghanistan. This act provides evidence of the above discussion, namely that certain terms can carry a moral imperative to act and an assumption that the action must come from the top, in this case the US Government.

The Empowerment Act began in January 2004 as the *Afghan Women Security and Freedom Act* championed by US Senator Barbara Boxer. This Act authorized $300 million per year through 2007 and earmarked funds for the Ministry of Women's Affairs, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, and Afghan women's NGOs. Two years later, Barbara Boxer attempted to revive the dormant act. She argued that President Karzai himself "admitted that we are falling short on the issue of Afghan women". She continued: "As we work to foster democracy in Afghanistan, we must be vigilant in ensuring that women take their rightful place in Afghan society" [61]. This bill never became law.

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[60] For more information, see: http://www.oneworld.net/external/?url=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.democracyinaction.org%2Fdia%2ForganizationsORG%2Ffeministmajority%2Fcampaign.jsp%3Fcampaign_KEY%3D4334%26t%3Dtemplate2.dwt

[61] For more information, see www.boxer.senate.gov.

The Act is problematic because it begins with a denial of Afghan women's agency and assumes a moral imperative to act. It further insists that funding shall focused on the adherence "to international standards for women's right and human rights" and includes a commitment "to disseminate information throughout Afghanistan on the rights of women and on international standards for human rights". Senator Boxer's message was sent to me through a small distribution list with the following preface from an Afghan woman leader: "I hope on the Afghan side this humanitarian money is spent wisely and efficiently in the right spots for the right reason".

It is not unusual for empowerment discourses – not unlike the act - to reveal an assumption that empowerment is a top-down effort (Parpart 2002: 50). This approach, combined with contradictions in the discourse, could inevitably lead to difficulties in implementation. Indeed, implementing empowerment is often less clear, despite its triumph at the level of discourse[62]. Kabeer explains that there is no agreement on the meaning of the term. Despite its centrality to the concept of power, the term is frequently used in a way that strips it of political meaning (Kabeer 1994: 224). Indeed, empowerment has achieved buzzword status, making it increasingly more slippery to put into practice. David Mosse elaborates that such strategically or politically useful ideas often lack conceptual clarity and are challenging to put into practice (2005: 15-16). And yet, such buzzwords frame solutions, giving aid policies a sense of purpose and suggesting a world that can be neatly repaired through technical solutions (Cornwall and Brock 2005: iii). In Afghanistan, technical interventions were applied to address political and structural issues, further masking social problems. Technical interventions allow little room for Afghan feminists advocating for structural change in their own contexts.

The discourse of technical interventions - and the buzzwords that animate them – are not neutral. These buzzwords assume meaning as they are employed in policies which then influence how the aid apparatus understands what it is doing – and why it has a moral imperative to do it. The agenda for transformation brings such a responsibility, and provides the legitimacy that the apparatus needs in order to intervene. The empowerment discourse mysteriously becomes stripped of politics and power – its core values – and assumes a

[62] Much has been written on discourses of development. For example, see Gasper, D. and R. Apthorpe (1996). Discourse Analysis and Policy Discourse. Arguing Development Policy: Frames and Discourses. D. Gasper and R. Apthorpe. London, Frank Cass. Grillo, R. and R. Stirrat (1997). Discourses of Development: Anthropological Perspectives. Oxford, Berg. Gardner, K. and D. Lewis (2000). "Dominant Paradigms Overturned or 'Business as Usual'? Development Discourse and the White Paper on International Development." Critique of Anthropology 20(1): 15-29.

depoliticized aid identity that no one can disagree with[63]. The term is then negotiated and operationalized in different ways in different settings. In so doing, it is further stripped of any understanding of, or engagement with, the local contexts in which it is applied.

The empowerment discourse can be seen as emanating from the 'rights-based development' agenda[64] where empowerment is defined as an awareness that one is a subject of rights with a capacity to act on the world and change it to benefit individuals, collectives, and society (Molyneux and Lazar 2003: 9). However, elements of this discourse are contested on the grounds that they are seen as a Western imposition and an act of moral imperialism, further representing an individualistic worldview that counters the collective identities of patriarchal societies (Molyneux and Lazar 2003: 2). I agree with Molyneux that the language of rights is not created or owned by the 'West' (2007). However, this perception holds much weight in Afghanistan, based largely on the means by which the 'rights' message has been delivered. Many theorists have argued this point, particularly in the Afghan context with the link between 'liberation' of women and the War on Terror. Vron Ware aptly states that "the notion that women's rights could be delivered by stealth bombers along with the funding of high profile initiatives requires extra careful scrutiny" (2006).

It can be argued that Orientalism[65] is at play when the West views the Eastern woman, building on the view that this discourse denies the agency of the 'Third World woman' (Mohanty 2003; Whitlock 2005). Chandra Mohanty further calls for an examination of the political implications of Western strategies and principles though the eyes of Third World women (2003: 21). The rights agenda is not easily put into practice, and runs the risk of failure when translated into action if it is not contextualized. The rights discourse needs to undergo adaptation and translation in context as a first step to ensuring that local priorities are represented. This does not comprise its underlying principle of equality. On the contrary, it offers a more solid foundation for indigenous movements.

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[63] Cornwall and Brock also argue, in the vein of Foucault, that the word 'discourse' itself has achieved buzzword status. For more information, see various works by Foucault and Cornwall, A. and K. Brock (2005). Beyond Buzzwords: "Poverty Reduction", "Participation" and "Empowerment" in Development Policy. Overarching Concerns Programme Paper Number 10. Geneva, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.

[64] Molyneux and Lazar present a thorough evolution of the 'rights-based' discourse, explaining its origins in the 1990s as an effort to repoliticize the rights discourse for women, representing the difference between proclaiming rights and actually exercising them. For more information, see Molyneux, M. and S. Lazar (2003). Doing the Rights Thing: Rights-based Development and Latin American NGOs. London, ITDG Publishing.

[65] This term was first coined by Edward Said. Said, E. W. (1979). Orientalism. New York, Vintage.

In Afghanistan, there is no hegemonic aid discourse[66], per se, but some perspectives have become more powerful than others, leaving little room for alternative (perhaps indigenous) discourses on women. The discourse on women in Afghanistan suggested that aid interventions would transform Afghan women from their position of subjugation to 'empowerment' and 'liberation'. Implicit in this message is the idea that women are 'prevented' from achieving aid because of socio-cultural constraints, as if it were simply a matter of changing attitudes and values (Ferguson 1994: 58). Such a perspective denies indigenous forms of agency, leaving women no role in their own 'empowerment'. It is problematic to assume that Afghan women need to be liberated, developed, and empowered. Images of Afghan women as victims serve a strategic purpose for various actors but tell little about women's realities, serving only to dislocate them as historical and political actors[67]. Further, in Islamic contexts, international pressure exerts influence on gender priorities and policies (Kandiyoti 1991), making it difficult for women to demonstrate agency in a context of pre-determined international opinion about the status of women in Islam.

An Afghan Feminism

Global feminisms are not alien importations but are responsive to issues women face within their own contexts, evolving when there is recognition of circumstances, norms, institutions and traditions that are detrimental to women's lives – and a desire to create alternatives (Narayan 1997: 12-3). Afghan women have struggled and negotiated the various fluctuations in their social status throughout history, using long-established mechanisms to achieve gains on their own terms. Feminism did not need to be imported; it has a long history in Afghanistan (Rawi 2004). Afghan feminism seeks firstly to distance itself from a Western feminist model. Although the underlying principles are the same, a link to Western feminism could appear to be a cooptation by the aid-occupation, thereby undermining Afghan women's long struggle. Furthermore, Afghan feminists view their battle as being against male domination as well as imperial domination (Rostami-Povey 2007).

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[66] I borrow this term from Hilhorst, D. (2003). The Real World of NGOs: Discourses, Diversity and Development. London, Zed Books.

[67] The hegemonic geopolitical discourse on Afghanistan has been primarily American. It can be argued that images of Afghan women as victims serve various political projects such as the American offensive against the Taliban, and the aid apparatus' quest for funding – and legitimacy.

Most Afghan women have never been militant activists but their appearance of public passivity often masks a private persuasiveness (Dupree 1990: 129). Interviews conducted with Afghan women activists for the book *Women of the Afghan War* include several comments that represent the views of many. Fatana asserts: "We need support from... organizations... But nobody can use us. We are very strong women. We are not stupid" (Ellis 2000: 193). Her views are not unique. In my experience, Afghan women – even those who were in the most dire of circumstances – had similar things to say. I also heard Sajida's sentiments repeated on numerous occasions: "People write about Afghan women being oppressed but because you are here you can see that Afghan women also fight back" (Ellis 2000: 217). Other literature also points to the strength of Afghan women, for example Chekeba: "With a veil on her head, no Afghan woman has ever stopped herself from letting her voice be heard, and frequently is it she who has the last word" (Delloye 2003: 158).

Afghan feminism – perhaps not labeled as such - is indeed responding to the conditions of Afghan women[68]. Narayan speaks to the idea of 'Third World' feminism as something indigenous to those countries (1997). Jaggar elaborates: "Whether or not they call themselves feminist, innumerable groups outside the West are currently working to promote what Molyneux calls women's 'gender interests'" (1998: 18). In so doing, Afghan women are exercising agency – despite the aid apparatus' inability to recognize it as such.

3. Implementation: Technical or Political Interventions

The phrase 'gender and development' (GAD) evolved from a focus on its acronym predecessor, WID ('women in development')[69]. The focus on WID can be credited to its founding mother, Esther Boserup, in her 1970 work that brings women into economic development (1970). Gains have been made in the early days of the WID discourse, however, since its onset the discourse has also:

> *... continued to create a colonized poor and marginalized woman who needed to be managed and educated; whose capacity for work and local decision making needed building; and who needed to be controlled reproductively and sexually*

[68] RAWA, the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, is an oft-cited example of an Afghan feminist movement (www.rawa.org) although there are many others.
[69] I have elected to avoid use of the WID/GAD collection of acronyms, opting instead for less loaded terminology. However, they deserve a brief explanation here as they present relevant background to the evolution of the discourse.

through a series of development interventions designed for 'women's empowerment'.
(Harcourt 2005: 43)

For these purposes, however, the WID/GAD distinction presents an interesting point of entry into the discussion on technical and political interventions. In a criticism of WID, Kabeer argues that "WID advocacy was grounded in a theory of 'irrational' prejudice and sex-role stereotypes when what was needed was a theory of male power and conflicting gender interests" (1994: 37-8). I will argue that aid interventions for women in Afghanistan have progressed much along the same lines as the evolution of WID and GAD - only backwards. Afghanistan began with a GAD-centered discourse, but resulted in WID-style implementation. A WID-style implementation is more conducive to technical solutions and a standardized aid package – the ideal scenario for an aid intervention.

Molyneux's work on strategic and practical gender interests[70] offered an initial framework to examine implementation of gender policies in light of intent. Practical interests address conditions of daily life (1985), while strategic interests are those aiming to "transform social relations in order to enhance women's position and to secure a more lasting repositioning of women within the gender order and within society at large" (1998: 75). Strategic and practical interests are not in opposition to each other. Indeed, Molyneux articulates that practical interests can be the basis for political transformation (1998: 78). Kate Young refers to this as transformatory potential (1993)[71]. However, this is difficult to measure as it requires women themselves to transform practical interventions into strategic gains. Practical interests rest on the assumption that there is compliance with the existing gender order, while strategic interests explicitly question that order (Molyneux 1998: 78).

While Molyneux's framework has value, it has been criticized. Beneria argues that the distinction sidelines women's diverse survival strategies, labeling them as un-feminist because they do not directly address feminist concerns (2003). Rostami-Povey advocates for a nuanced understanding of the strategic and practical distinction, demonstrating through her research on women in Iran that access to resources can indirectly bring women closer to

[70] It is essential to make the distinction between gender interests and women's interests. Women's interests do not necessarily reflect gender issues, while gender interests are those arising from the social relations and positioning of the sexes, therefore pertaining to both men and women. Molyneux, M. (1998). Analysing Women's Movements. Feminist Visions of Development: Gender Analysis and Policy. C. Jackson and R. Pearson. London, Routledge.
[71] For more information on the practical needs approach to transformation, see Alvarez, S. E. (1990). Engendering Democracy in Brazil : Women's Movements in Politics. Princeton, Princeton UP.

gender equality. Iranian women found empowerment through their varied survival strategies (Rostami-Povey 2005).

Molyneux's framework might be too rigid for Afghanistan because it might obfuscate such forms of empowerment. Equating strategic gender interests with transformation may work in theory, but such formulations will have their limits when applied to the Afghan context. In Afghanistan and other aftermath contexts, aid interventions focused initially on practical needs. The discrepancy in Afghanistan is between the rhetoric (strategic) and the implementation (practical). There has therefore been a gap between observed needs and planned responses (Stockton 2004) for women. Although interventions rarely challenge existing patterns of power (Mosse 2005: 19), implementation should at least attempt to reflect the intent – transformation of the gender order. This measure may not be applicable to Afghan realities in its current form, however it presented a useful starting point for analysis and an opportunity to engage with a concept that originates from a Western 'gender and development' agenda and to test its relevance in another context.

I subsequently elected to make a distinction between political and technical interventions. Political issues can include women's strategic interests, addressing structural issues and transforming the gender order to bring it closer to equality. As Ferguson explains, politics is about the distribution of power – resources and influence – and understanding who gets what, when, and how (1994). Technical interventions, on the other hand, are apolitical. They dangerously ignore the political nature of gender issues and shy away from confronting imbalances of power. The aid apparatus is equipped to provide technical solutions, although such inputs are less likely to achieve transformation. Whether the intent is technical or political, aid interventions are always received as a political tool – with a political message.

In Afghanistan, political and technical gender interventions need to work in tandem in order to instigate longer-term strategic change in gender relations. Jo Beall's analysis of Colombia and South Africa reinforces this, demonstrating that

> *Advancing gender equality demands striking a balance between the essentially political project of ensuring women's social and economic participation and political representation, and the more technical project of institutionalizing or mainstreaming a gender perspective in policy and practice.*

(1998: 530)

As this research seeks to demonstrate, there are possible consequences in prioritizing one over the other. An understanding of the distinction between technical and political interventions helps to unpack the tension between policies which seek to distribute resources in ways that preserve and reinforce inequalities and those seeking to challenge inequalities (Kabeer 1994: 91). This distinction is more apparent in theory than in practice, yet it serves as a starting point to measure actual implementation in light of intent[72]. This research is in line with Mosse's argument that aid interventions are not necessarily driven by policy intent. In fact, interventions might very well be concealed by policy, leaving actors to maintain "coherent representations regardless of events" (Mosse 2005: 2). Therefore, the identification and implementation of interests is highly political and should be seen within a larger context of social change, one in which aid agencies are both products of, and actors in, particular political processes. Rostami-Povey explains it well:

> *Women's rights issues have become depoliticized and have been hijacked... In this context, everybody and everything responsible for gender equality in Afghanistan equates to nobody and nothing being responsible for putting women's interests and experiences of injustice on the political agenda.*
> (2007: 138)

The gendered effects of aid policy and practice cannot be divorced from the operations of aid institutions. There is an increased risk that aid interventions will have unanticipated effects when policy rhetoric does not match actual implementation. Gender-focused aid policy in Afghanistan employed a discourse of transformation, using terminology associated with political and structural issues with the goal of encouraging social change and redressing gender inequalities. However, implementation of those policies focused on meeting practical needs through technical interventions, such as initiatives to rectify gender imbalances in education and employment.

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[72] Molyneux's framework has been operationalized by Caroline Moser, who incorporated practical and strategic *needs* into gender program planning. For present purposes and following Kate Young (1993), I will refer to strategic interests and practical needs. For more information on the concept of needs and interests, see Jonasdottir, A. G. (1988). On the Concept of Interest, Women's Interests, and the Limitations of Interest Theory. The Political Interests of Gender: Developing Theory and Research with a Feminist Face. K. B. Jones and A. G. Jonasdottir. London, Sage.

There is no agreed-upon measure of transformation or progress for women in Afghanistan. From the perspective of the international media, the *chaddari* has often taken on a symbolic role as the barometer of social change. Yet the *chaddari*, or any act of veiling, must not be confused with, or made to stand for, lack of women's agency (Abu-Lughod 2002: 786). In current discussions on Afghanistan, generalizations on the 'situation of women' often refer unconstructively to visible transformations - prevalence of veil or *chaddari*, or meetings of men and women - over institutional changes such as laws and improvement in status (Centlivres-Demont 1994). Preliminary conversations with Afghan women[73] suggest that gender inequalities have not been rectified by engagement in aid activities as they had expected, based on aid rhetoric. The promise of transformation, as it were, did not materialize as women had anticipated. In fact, these women were quite vocal about what they saw as a deteriorating situation regarding gender equality. They expressed concern about the high-profile focus from aid agencies and the media, and felt that facile analyses regarding the *chaddari* and their low social status were misguided and did not reflect Afghan realities.

The framework of political and technical interventions is applicable to Afghanistan in that it allows space for strategic examination of existing aid interventions with regard to the goal of addressing social and gender inequalities (Wieringa 1994; Rowlands 1998). This framework helps to reveal the ways in which women's interests and needs were formulated and subsequently implemented by aid institutions with a view to what they *say* and measuring it against what they *do*. Further, this is Ferguson's dichotomy that is also recognizable from gender literature as explored by Moser, Molyneux, and others[74]. This research does not intend to be wedded to this theoretical construct. It is therefore more important to understand how Afghan women – and different groups of Afghan women - define transformation and what it is they hope to see transformed.

4. Unintended Effects

Similar to any aid activities, gender interventions may produce significant unintended consequences for women and for the gender order. Kandiyoti reinforces this point,

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[73] Within the NGO I worked with, many discussions were held regarding Afghan women's perceptions of their lives after conflict and their participation in development activities. The program supported over 3000 women during its first year of operation (2002-2003).

[74] As one example, see Moser, C. O. N. and F. C. Clark, Eds. (2001). Victims, Perpetrators or Actors? Gender, Armed Conflict and Political Violence. London, Zed Books.

articulating that socioeconomic transformation and state policy aggravates and reproduces gender inequalities (1991). Kabeer calls development a "purposeful project" that entails "unacknowledged assumptions and unanticipated outcomes" (1994: 69). Intervention is a non-linear, socially constructed and negotiated process with unintended consequences, including the responses of those who "may struggle to define and defend their own social spaces, cultural boundaries and positions within the wider power field" (Long and Long 1992: 37). As Ferguson's case study demonstrates, these "side effects" of aid endeavors, emerging regardless of the aims and strategies of aid institutions, may be significant enough to overwhelm the intended effects of the intervention (1994). An examination of aid interventions could reveal an attempt at social transformation, carrying both negative and positive connotations (Kabeer 1994: 70). It is therefore important to study aid interventions in practice ethnographically using both the analysis of everyday practices and discursive constructions (Gupta 1995).

Anthropologist Norman Long distinguishes between two types of approach used in aid interventions to initiate social change: the improvement approach and the transformation approach. The transformation approach attempts to establish new forms of social organization, making a radical break with existing systems (1977). He explains the disconnect between policy and its effects this way:

> *There is no one-to-one relationship between policy commitment and the actual consequences of policy. This is most strikingly the case with the attempts at implementing a transformation approach, which generally spawns a large number of apparently unintended consequences.*
> (1977: 183-4)

Long also presents a useful tool for a sociological analysis of structural change, based on "focusing upon the critical points of intersection between different levels of social order where conflicts of value and social interest are most likely to occur" (1984: 177). These junctures, labeled 'interfaces' by Long, are found where "outside agencies intervene in order to implement a particular development policy or programme" (1984: 177). There are several interfaces at play in Afghanistan. In turn, these interfaces can yield unanticipated effects. One such unanticipated effect can emerge from gender-focused interventions when they fail to address *gender* issues, focusing only on women. The neglect of men in aid programming is an area of concern as transforming the gender order entails a focus on both

women and men. Local gender ideologies are already on unstable ground in the aftermath of conflict – gender interventions notwithstanding. Gender interventions could further exacerbate this instability, presenting a challenge to Afghan forms of patriarchy. It is in this vein that I argue for a re-animation of gender in the Afghan context.

Gender interventions create and work with particular discourses, as has been previously illustrated. Studying gender and aid discourses in practice can help to explain how these discourses operate in everyday situations and how they order social relationships in local communities – intentionally or not (Hilhorst 2003: 80). The difference between an aid discourse and an academic discourse, according to Ferguson, is that the academic discourse is historically contextualized (1994). Therefore, an exploration of the effects of discourses should contextualize the social experiences of Afghan women and men. This is a particular challenge in Afghanistan, where rhetoric has taken precedence over meaningful interventions (Niland 2004), particularly for women (Clark 2004). Further, the supply-driven, technical nature of projects have focused on outputs over impact (Leader and Atmar 2004). Such formulations have varied effects on the gender order.

Interventions deny Afghan women's agency by promoting the discourse of externally-driven transformation. The assumption is that Afghan women are unable to act on their own behalf. Facile analyses of women as "vulnerable individuals living in a vacuum may eventually isolate rather than reintegrate women" (Azarbaijani-Moghaddam 2004: 103). Despite the discourse, this research seeks to reveal the manifestations of Afghan women's agency.

Creating an artificial divide between technical and political interventions could result in unexpected social outcomes. It is difficult to isolate factors and determine which aspect of implementation produced particular effects. The separation of aid intervention into implementation and effects is an oversimplification of a highly complex set of processes that can only be understood in context. It is possible only to illuminate the different paths that may have led to certain effects. Aid policy-makers and policy implementers therefore have a key role to play, not only in how they interpret women's needs and interests, but also in the ways in which they choose to bring these needs and interests to fruition through programs.

In the few existing analyses, there is little consensus on the effects of gender-focused aid on transformation of the gender order in Afghanistan. Rostami-Povey notes the consciousness-raising that took place during the Afghan conflict, with women organizing around gender-

related survival strategies and, in the process, becoming aware of more gender-specific concerns (2004: 172). According to Rostami-Povey, aid in Afghanistan for women has moved from a focus on practical needs to strategic interests through challenging patriarchal gender relations (2004). However, journalist and researcher Victoria Brittain asserts that adding women to processes to compensate for previous neglect does little to address structural issues. She cites Afghanistan as a case in point, explaining that results for women have been "very meager" (2002: 8). In fact, "a deconstructive move which is intended to be enabling and radical at the theoretical level may turn out to be not only debilitating but also patronizing and dismissive of local understandings when it is enacted in a development context" (Kandiyoti 1998: 146).

According to a report on increasing women's participation, power dynamics in Afghanistan are negatively affected when aid is not distributed according to socially defined boundaries (Wakefield and Bauer 2005: 2). The report further cautions a recognition of the unintended negative effects of gender programs (2005: 7). This is particularly relevant in Afghanistan, where gender is a highly charged and politicized project. Definitions and perspectives reflect a particular political power, revealing a lack of consensus about the primary goal at the strategic level. At the aid level, the apparatus has defined Afghanistan's 'problems' in depoliticized terms (Leader and Atmar 2004: 175). And yet, as Afghan history demonstrates, gender issues (and their affiliated interventions) continue to be a highly charged sphere of Afghan life. As a result, aid institutions are political actors "whose actions have political impacts whether they like it or not" (Leader and Atmar 2004: 181).

Unexpected effects have emerged from gender interventions because the creation of a particular discourse encouraged the formulation of a particular type of policy that was then not implemented in practice. There are therefore several probable paths – or a combination of all – that have led to these unanticipated outcomes. It is important to recognize that these are only partial effects; it is not possible to determine all factors that contribute to a certain outcome. Research can reveal select factors that may play a significant role in altering the gender order. Gender-focused international aid can possibly have positive effects on the gender order. This could be achieved in recognizing women's agency in a gender analysis that is historically and socially embedded. Ideally, this entails a focus on both strategic interests and practical needs in gender planning. Effects may be neutral if interventions maintain the status quo and do not disrupt the gender order. Negative effects

are likely when interventions extract women from their historical and political realities and undermine women's agency.

Thus at one end of the spectrum, interventions can offer the possibility for more public roles for women in the aftermath, including leadership positions in organizations and government, at the other end, violence against women is a possible negative effect which prevents women from accessing opportunities presented by their engagement in aid activities. In analyses of the effects of aid interventions, the positive effects – more public in nature – tend to obfuscate potential negative effects, and are often used as measures of social change[75]. The combination of positive and negative effects could therefore hinder transformation for women.

Research on women in other contexts reveals that violence against women can increase in the aftermath[76]. I recognize the difficulties in demonstrating that increased violence against women may have been a possible negative effect, however it is possible that aid interventions created an enabling environment for such effects. Chapter VIII elaborates on violence in the aftermath and the challenges in obtaining accurate information. However, based on data in the chapters that follow, Afghan perceptions reveal that aid interventions may have played a role in producing these effects. Gender rhetoric coupled with the high-profile focus on women could be a key element in fomenting a backlash. Kandiyoti notes that gender-transformatory initiatives bring significant political risks, including a "hardening of attitudes" (2005 p.19). Such negative changes can be understood within a context of patriarchal social structures (Walby 1990)[77]. Walby demonstrated that in industrialized, capitalist countries there is a shift from private to public patriarchy in that women are no longer restricted to domestic life but are now exploited in public structures such as the state and employment (1990). In Afghanistan, women face the obstacles of both public and private patriarchy, yet there has been significant decrease in public patriarchy since the ousting of the Taliban. An increase in violence against women (specifically in the form of

[75] For example, in Afghanistan, women represented one-third of the delegates in the *Loya Jirga*, or Grand Assembly, yet these women expressed concern for their safety on the streets and at home.

[76] Much of the evidence to support this emerges from the Bosnia example. There is extensive scholarship on this issue.

[77] However, men are not immune from these social changes. The interview with General Nazari in Appendix 5 illustrates that men are also experiencing increases in violence. In addition, violence against women by other women is also an unacknowledged concern. Such violence is not simply about men as perpetrators and women as victims.

domestic violence and self-immolation) could connote a shift from public to private patriarchy in Afghanistan[78].

[78] As one example to demonstrate the increase in violence, see RAWA at www.rawa.org

Conclusions

While understandings of patriarchy and the notions of a possible backlash present a common argument, Afghanistan is unique in that new forms of violence might be created. These arguments might tell one part of the story, however they remain insufficient. Donna Pankhurst speaks well to this, and emphasizes the importance of nuanced understandings that present a counter to simplistic assumptions (2007). A nuanced understanding would reveal that in many Muslim societies, "women become the marker of political goals and cultural identity... when power is contested" (Moghadam 1999: 174). Afghan history demonstrates that such politicizations of the gender order are not uncommon. However, there is a need to expose the possibility of an aid-driven restructuring of the gender order – and its effects on women in Afghanistan.

Theoretically, this research builds on the work of Ferguson, informed by Kandiyoti, Walby, Jaggar, Molyneux, and Rostami-Povey, placing their theories in the context of Afghanistan's aftermath with a view to examining the discourses surrounding gender-focused international aid. Using a historically and culturally informed analysis, I aspire not to develop generalizations but to contextualize diversity (de Vries 1992: 66). This study aims not only to problematize the way women's interests were formulated by the aid apparatus but also to understand the effects of such formulations on women and men in Afghanistan.

This research is also in line with the key themes outlined in the recently-released book Feminisms in Development. The authors see several emerging themes that can be aligned with my presuppositions as stated in Chapter I. Firstly, the authors see a battle over interpretation, namely a struggle for interpretive power as a core element of the feminist engagement with the aid apparatus. This fits with my discussion of interpretation rooted in matters of agency. Secondly, the authors address how feminist intent is undermined by the functioning of the aid apparatus. This raises the issue of agency to address the discourse of transformation and the distinction between strategic interests and practical needs. Their third theme advocates a feminist engagement with aid as a political project. Indeed, this is the underlying theme of this research: an attempt to depoliticize gender-focused aid will have unintended effects (Cornwall, Harrison et al. 2007: 2).

Chapter III begins with an understanding of the trends, themes, and similarities that characterize aid and gender documents of international and national institutions. To this

end, the point of departure for an examination of discourses of transformation and gender in Afghanistan is through policy texts. This is checked against the perspectives of the policy-makers and policy implementers charged with bringing those texts to fruition in order to understand the political subtexts that underpin articulations of needs and interests. Kabeer writes that "for a social-relations framework to be useful, it is important that the institutional analysis of gender relations is linked to the design and evaluation of policy and planning" (1994: 285). This analysis is followed by the experiences and perceptions of Afghan women and men. It is through these perceptions that the entire aid intervention in Afghanistan is imagined. The effects of gender programs are a mechanism through which Afghanistan's intervention is discursively constituted. Therefore, this story prioritizes Afghan women and men's experiences and interpretations of their own realities in the context of the aid apparatus in Afghanistan's aftermath.

CHAPTER III: Gender Policy on Paper: Transformation in Texts

1. Trends and Themes

In line with Molyneux's work, it is essential to question how far national and international instruments have taken account of women's needs and interests – and to assess the extent to which strategic interests have become "entombed within official doctrine" (1985: 250). In this vein, an investigation into policy formulation begins here with a textual analysis of aid and gender policy papers of the large aid institutions operating in Afghanistan. Molyneux expressed particular interest in the priorities allocated to the goal of women's emancipation alongside other goals, such as economic development. She does not question the link between the two as they actually coexist, but instead problematizes the nature of the link by asking if women's emancipation is merely a means to achieving economic development, or if it exists as a goal in and of itself (1985: 250-1). Mosse also advocates an examination of texts as narratives defining problems and interpreting events (2005: 8). He argues for texts to be read backwards, within their own contexts, to better understand the sociology of the document (2005: 15). To this end, an examination of aid and gender policy texts is relevant to this discussion.

The following analysis begins with five aid institutions – UNAMA, USAID, UNIFEM, UNDP, and the World Bank – and an introduction to their roles in Afghanistan. These organizations were selected based on their roles as core members of the Advisory Group on Gender (AGG), the high-level body charged with supporting the Ministry of Women's Affairs and providing strategic direction on all things gender in Afghanistan.

The AGG, the GAG, and the GSG

The AGG works to ensure that gender is mainstreamed across the various thematic areas of focus as outlined in Afghanistan's aid interventions[79]. This is guided by an "understanding of the different situations, needs and power relations between men and women, and the different impacts of policy and financial decisions on men and women" as critical for achieving national development goals (Ministry of Women's Affairs). The AGG further recognizes that gender comprises what is referred to as a cross-cutting concern and, to that

[79] For more information, see http://www.af/ag/gender/index.asp

end, interventions in all sectors must be based on "systematic gender analyses and consideration of the implications of policies, programmes and budgets on women's and *men*'s well-being" [emphasis added] (Ministry of Women's Affairs). In 2002, the Minister of Women's Affairs appointed UNIFEM, UNDP, and USAID as core members of the group.

But the AGG is not new. Dupree writes about the composition of the group in 1996:

> *UNDP set up an advisory group on gender. It consisted of between ten and fifteen women, half of them foreigners, half Afghans. The foreigners did all the talking. Only when you asked one of the Afghan women a direct question would she come forth with her observations. This is symptomatic of the leadership problems.*
> (1996: 15)

Today, the AGG still consists of between ten and fifteen women. However, thirteen or fourteen of them are non-Afghan, and only one or two are Afghans, depending on the day[80]. It is worth noting, that there is no male member of the Advisory Group on *Gender* [emphasis mine]. During 2002-2003, this group was referred to as the Gender Advisory Group (GAG) but was changed to Advisory Group on Gender (AGG) because of the former's unfavorable acronym. The AGG was also referred to as the "Gender Nazis" by many in Afghanistan's international aid apparatus.

In my capacity as the head of an international NGO, I had a very difficult time gaining access to this impenetrable group. When I was finally granted membership, I understood that other NGOs – both local and international – would not be able to access this group. As a result, I used the leverage I had to set up a parallel structure called the Gender Sector Group (GSG) in early 2003 to share discussions and events in the AGG meeting and play an intermediary role. The GSG met through the Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR) and gathered approximately 60 local and international NGOs working on women and gender in Afghanistan. Since my departure from the aid apparatus in Afghanistan, the GSG has lost its link to the AGG and the two groups no longer speak to each other.

[80] This is based on personal observations and my participation in the AGG, 2002-2005.

Themes for Analysis

Analyses of at least two of the operating documents are presented for each institution: the core aid policy paper at the onset of the study period, and a follow up document to examine evolution of the discourse. An analysis of the gender policy documents then follows. An exception to the time frame is made for the Afghan government documents. The most recent aid and gender papers have been used as they represent an amalgam of previous documents produced during Afghanistan's aftermath. They are also the most thorough and detailed documents available, and therefore they comprise the only exception to the requirement that papers fit within the study period.

For aid and gender documents, I examined the level of substantial reporting on women and gender. I assessed the documents with a view to the presence of gender issues – and the quality of that presence. My approach was informed by a number of studies where aid policy documents have been analyzed for their gender content or to discern their approach to women and gender. Beall articulates that "experience has shown that when gender issues are not flagged, they are subsequently missed" (1998: 238). I am further concerned with the extent to which gender has been 'mainstreamed' in the document. Despite rhetoric, very often gender is *not* a cross-cutting issue but has in fact been isolated in the document. It merits questioning when a claim to mainstream gender issues is substantiated by an isolated paragraph on gender.

Beall explains that the gender and poverty nexus forms the core of Moser's "anti-poverty" approach[81] and a part of the liberal WID discourse. This focus shifts attention from transformation and women's strategic gender interests (1998: 239). Such an approach could also result in an emphasis on women-as-victims as opposed to a focus on women's agency. Further, this approach facilitates the creation of technical solutions to a political problem, clearly designating space for the aid intervention as the only alternative for women. "All too often policy statements from international agencies are written as if the agency itself is engaging from a neutral position" (Beall 1998). Given these conditions, it becomes difficult for the aid intervention to assess progress made for women. This is usually done in terms of quantity – money spent, women trained, and so on – in lieu of actual improvements made in women's lives.

[81] For more information, see Moser, C. O. N. (1993). Gender Planning and Development: Theory, Practice and Training. London, Routledge.

A further contradiction entails the mention of men in so-called gender documents. In these cases, men are included in the document only as obstacles to women's development, or when making negative comparisons to women (Cleaver 2002). This is problematic as it negates men's roles in women's development – and negates the importance of their own development. As a result, interventions assume that gender relations and power are a zero-sum game, and that interventions for women should offer no alternatives for men (Cleaver 2002: 1). Further, Mohanty argues that binary divisions between men and women are reinforced through facile analyses of man-as-exploiter and woman-as-exploited. These simplistic formulations are historically reductive and programmatically ineffectual (2003: 31).

Molyneux advocates a review of policy documents to confirm the shift that she has noted in definitions of intervention priorities. She writes of a "move away from an identification of their work as needs-based and service-driven to a more *strategic* [emphasis original] approach, in which rights issues were increasingly incorporated into their work and were given special relevance in work that targeted poverty" (Molyneux and Lazar 2003: 6). However, despite lofty claims to instigate social change, there were few practical applications for this shift. To this end, she advocates a textual analysis that includes an understanding of the presence of terms like empowerment and gender in order to illuminate the extent of this intervention priority shift on paper. This is the approach adopted here.

Guiding questions for the textual analysis of general aid documents include:

- Is there a discussion of gender and/or women? In what context(s)?
- What definition of gender is employed in the document?
- Is gender mainstreamed in the document or found only in isolated section(s)?
- Are women being used instrumentally in the document? Is there an emphasis on women's needs and interests – or is women's presence only to ensure effective development outcomes (Beall 1998: 239)?

The review of additional aid documents will examine for noticeable changes to the themes. The textual analysis of gender-specific documents was guided by the following:

- What definition of gender is in operation? Is there explicit mention of men? If so, is it only in the context of men as obstacles to women's development?

- What language accompanies use of gender and/or women (i.e. empowerment, rights, etc.)? Is empowerment language employed as a way to escape the anti-poverty approach (Beall 1998)?
- Is there an assumption that 'women's problems' can be solved with technical solutions through aid interventions?

2. Policy Formulation: International Textual Analysis

UNAMA

Established in March 2002 through United Nations Security Council Resolution 1401, UNAMA's original mandate was to support the Bonn process[82]. Since the conclusion of the process, UNAMA has moved on to provide political and strategic advice for the peace process; provide good offices; assist Afghanistan's government towards implementation of the Afghanistan Compact; promote human rights; provide technical assistance; and manage all UN humanitarian relief, recovery, reconstruction and development activities in coordination with the government. UNAMA has two main pillars - development and politics – within which issues of human rights, rule of law, police, military, gender, drugs, and legal issues are addressed. The UNAMA website states that:

> *The programme of work is determined by Afghan needs and priorities; the Mission aims at having as many nationals as possible in posts that traditionally have been occupied by expatriates; capacity-building is a cardinal principle and UNAMA works towards the establishment of strong and sustainable Afghan institutions - in that context its ultimate goal is to work itself out of a job.*

UNAMA's main operating documents stem from the reports to the Secretary General on the situation in Afghanistan[83]. These are issued three to five times per year and comprise the latest information on Afghanistan. *The Situation in Afghanistan and its Implications for International Peace and Security: March 2002* is UNAMA's first document of this nature (2002). The report makes 12 references to women, seven of which refer to "women and men of Afghanistan" or make negative comparisons of women's suffering as compared to men.

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[82] For more information, see http://www.unama-afg.org/

[83] The full title of these reports is: Secretary-General Report to the UN Security Council on the Situation in Afghanistan and its Implications for International Peace and Security. These reports can be found at: http://www.unama-afg.org/docs/UN-Docs.htm

The use of the term gives little indication of women's agency and in fact places an emphasis on women's poor condition. No mention is made, however, of solutions to address this condition. Seven references are made to gender. While none of these are in an incorrect context, the report refers vaguely and unconstructively to "gender issues" and a "gender-sensitive approach", while failing to define what the term might mean in Afghanistan. Therefore, while 'gender issues' are present, they appear to lack a robust definition. Further, use of the term is concentrated in the paragraph on "human rights and gender issues" and not throughout the document.

The Situation in Afghanistan and its Implications for International Peace and Security: Emergency International Assistance for Peace, Normalcy and Reconstruction of War-stricken Afghanistan: March 2006 (United Nations 2006) is used as a comparison with its predecessor, to examine possible changes and evolution of gender rhetoric. This 2006 report makes special mention of women throughout, particularly in reference to their participation in politics and the 2005 parliamentary elections. Many references to women also form part of discussions on increased violence against women and the creation of women's shelters and safe houses. It is worthwhile noting that this report has 18 references to women, only three of which refer to "women and men" in general terms. In terms of gender, the trend is reversed. There are three references to the term gender, two in discussions of various UNAMA units of operation (the UNAMA Gender Unit), and one making reference to "human rights and gender issues" as areas where the Afghan National Police need training. In summary, while the dialogue on women has matured in the four years between these reports, the use of the term gender has in fact diminished. And still, no definition or operational guidelines are provided on how to bring the various "gender issues" to fruition.

The Report of the Secretary General on the Situation of Women and Girls in Afghanistan (United Nations 2003), written in January 2003 and presented to the Commission on the Status of Women during their 47th session in New York in March of 2003, emphasizes the extent of women's suffering in Afghanistan. The report contains 48 references to the term gender and no definition of its operation in Afghan contexts. Further, there are only six references to men, none of which discuss their participation in gender-related efforts. The report states that it presents an overview of "gender-related assistance". The report makes five references to "gender sensitivity", five references to "the gender perspective", and nine references to "gender mainstreaming". It also emphasizes the importance of a permanent

position of "gender advisor" to ensure that the sensitivity, perspective, and mainstreaming are done. Yet the report fails to explain what this means in the Afghan context.

The 2005 report (United Nations 2005) follows the same lines, making 53 references to gender without incorporating a workable definition of the term. However, the majority of these uses refer to gender in the robust sense and focus the discussion on "gender *and* women" (emphasis added). Other references to gender include "gender training modules", "the gender perspective", "gender task force", "gender-sensitive amendments to law", amongst others. All of these are used in the abstract, without a clear understanding of how this is to be put into operation. The only indication given in these documents of operationalizing these concepts is to incorporate the technical solution of adding women to all existing efforts and also isolating women as an 'object' of aid interventions. These reports also give little indication of women's agency in Afghanistan, implying that the presence of the aid institution is therefore justified as it is the only way to achieve gains for women.

USAID

According to the USAID Afghanistan web page: "To rebuild the country and combat terrorism, USAID works to build a safe, stable society that meets the needs of its people and eliminates an environment that breeds extremism"[84]. USAID efforts include improving agricultural productivity, seeking alternatives to poppy, promoting basic education for girls, and providing access to basic health care, amongst other things. It is worthwhile noting that each USAID initiative has its own section (comprised of approximately two paragraphs) that begins with a problem statement explaining that the deterioration of the sector is due to the Taliban. The statement is immediately followed by a detailed explanation of USAID's efforts to rectify perceived Taliban damage. One such example follows:

> *Years of corruption, brutality and tyranny imposed by the Taliban reduced Afghanistan to political, economic and social ruin. USAID supported voter registration, civic and voter education programs in 29 of 34 provinces, polling, ballot counting, security and logistics to allow an estimated 6.84 million Afghans to cast their vote in the historic parliamentary elections of September 2005.*

[84] For more information, see http://www.usaid.gov/locations/asia_near_east/afghanistan/

Finally, USAID touts the reconstruction of 389 kilometers of the major Kabul-Kandahar highway as an effort that has "revitalized entire villages"[85]. On the ground in Afghanistan, USAID interventions are often conflated with US government interventions, and vice versa. The US government does include its efforts through USAID as part of its contribution to Afghanistan, but for these purposes, I am examining USAID interventions exclusively and have elected to keep US and USAID efforts analytically distinct.

Afghanistan's Path to Reconstruction: Obstacles, Challenges, and Issues for Congress (Margesson 2002) of May 2002 makes nine references to women, seven of which refer to the "plight of women and children" in a paragraph on Women and Children. The other two references to women discuss Taliban treatment of women. There is no mention of constructive plans, nor any mention of gender issues. The report *Afghanistan Reborn: Building Afghan Democracy* (USAID 2004), written in October of 2004, follows similar lines. This presents a good example of the use of rhetoric in aid documents, particularly regarding women. The report has 44 references to women, and none to gender. There is a discernable pattern here: USAID's 'accomplishments' for women are each at first juxtaposed by their abuses under the Taliban in that specific sector. For example, according to a quote by Andrew Natsios, the former USAID administrator:

> *Afghans have already made huge advances from life under a cruel, medieval theocracy that barred girls from school, kept women from public life and amputated limbs as punishment. Today Afghanistan is a land of bustling markets, schools filled with eager students and people enjoying a new birth of freedom. We can be proud...*
> (2004: 1)

The strong use of anti-Taliban rhetoric stands out in USAID documents more than anywhere else. It could appear to be employed as a constant justification for US actions in Afghanistan. Any statement regarding Afghan women's poor condition is qualified by Taliban abuses. There are nine cases where women's suffering under the Taliban is mentioned, five of which are followed with examples of USAID accomplishments to rectify the situation. One example of many can be found in the one-line overview on the Table of Contents page: "Afghan and

[85] This controversial highway came up repeatedly in interviews with Afghans as an example of a highly-publicized and extremely expensive effort that has done little to improve the daily lives of Afghans. In fact, the highway has achieved notoriety as a significant security risk, further restricting its use.

Coalition forces remove Taliban, liberate women, children and minorities, and pave way for return of 3.7 million refugees".

It is also important to note the frequent employment of liberation rhetoric, such as the heading "Freedom Arrives" to announce Afghanistan's "liberation" from the Taliban regime. Thus, of 44 uses of "women", 28 address women specifically – and constructively. The remainder refer to "women and men" in a general sense, women's abuses and suffering, and "women and children" along with other vulnerable groups. The final analysis includes both of these documents combined.

These points are again found in a speech by James R. Kunder, Assistant Administrator for Asia and the Near East, on *USAID's Progress in Helping the People of Afghanistan* made on 28 June 2006 before the Committee on Armed Services at the US House of Representatives. Kunder makes four references to women: one of these states that "more and more women are making their own choices about their lives" (2006: 1); another refers to the suffering of "women and children"; one addresses the need for training for women; and the last one refers to "US men and women in uniform". There are no references to gender, nor any concrete measures to illustrate USAID's progress for women.

When I consulted USAID's Afghanistan desk for their main operating documents and gender policies on women, I was told to look firstly to the International Women's Day Special Report 2006, providing an overview of USAID's projects that are geared toward women. I was also told to consult the fact sheets on USAID's midwifery program as well as their sectoral program sheets: democracy and governance, agriculture, alternative livelihoods, infrastructure, economic growth, education, and health. These fact sheets make token mention of women where relevant, demonstrating an effort to indeed mainstream women's concerns across sectors.

The International Women's Day Report states that funding for women's programs in Afghanistan has been planned into USAID's 2007 budget. Of the $802,800,000 requested for 2007, the report states that $76,405,000 will "directly benefit women and girls" (2006: 1). This ambitious figure includes the following:

$23.2 million for health programs
$20.7 million for education programs
$5 million for women-led NGOs

$2 million for entrepreneurship

$10.1 million for alternative livelihoods

Based on previous – largely unfavorable - evaluations of USAID's past performance in Afghanistan, there is much skepticism that the above programs will be brought to fruition and that women will indeed benefit. The USAID/OTI (Office of Transitional Initiatives) gender evaluation presents an example of such skepticism. I include this evaluation firstly because it is the most detailed of its kind in terms of assessing implementation of gender interventions. Secondly, in my professional capacity I was asked to conduct this evaluation but was unable to accept the assignment due to a repeated change of the schedule. However, I was given all of the core documents and incorporate these in the analysis that follows.

The document *Evaluation of OTI's Program in Afghanistan: Focus on Gender Scope of Work* states the following: "The volatile political and economic nature of transitioning countries requires fast, emergency-type political responses that show immediate, visible and positive effects" (2005). One might argue that Afghanistan needed precisely the opposite. There are many contradictions in this phrase, not the least of which is the idea that "political responses" can be "fast", and, even more so, that aid interventions are equipped to provide political solutions. The following evaluation demonstrates that USAID's solutions are hardly political but are in fact technical. Further, one could easily dispute what constitutes "immediate, visible and positive effects", as demonstrated by a project such as the Kabul-Kandahar highway.

The document states that a focus has been on "vulnerable groups, including women", and in this sector "OTI enables USAID to capitalize on 'windows of opportunity' where quickly deployed aid can make a critical difference to a country's transition to peaceful, democratic government" (2005). For the duration of the OTI program – October 2001 to June 2005 - $46.6 million was committed of $70 million budget for Afghanistan projects. Carlin explains that 17%, or $7.9 million, of which was for projects "designed, to some degree, with women... in mind" (2005: 35). Of the $7.9 million, $2.37 million funded construction and furnishings of the Women's Resource Centers (WRC). The Scope of Work's heading "Gender Activities" states the following:

> *While gender has not been articulated as an objective, OTI's implementing partners have made a concerted effort to include women in most major program*

components, including media, infrastructure projects, and training programs. At the beginning of the program, gender was not clearly identified as a major goal, but it increased in importance over time due to the influx of gender-specific funds... Additionally, women have been incorporated into infrastructure and other projects unrelated to gender activities in order to improve their role in society.
(2005)

No mention was made of analyses defining what women might believe to constitute an 'improvement' in their role in society - or whether they sought this 'improvement' in the first place.

The Scope of Work lists several themes that guided the evaluation. Selected themes follow:

1. *How did the OTI program eventually evolve to include women and women's issues, and why? How did OTI incorporate women's issues into projects that may not be friendly to women's participation, and has this had any impact on women's roles in Afghan society?*
2. *Has there been a change in women's status and opportunities, or at least in attitudes about women and how they should be treated?*
3. *In a culturally challenging country like Afghanistan, was OTI able to assist in the advancement of women's rights while working within the context of a conservative culture? Was OTI able to be sensitive to the culture so as to work within while still progressing?*
4. *How have OTI partners addressed internal/external resistance to the inclusion of women? How do others perceive the gender integration efforts of OTI partners? Is a focus on gender appropriate for transitional programming?*
(OTI 2005)

The questions guiding the evaluation also asked what the best measure would be for success of their Afghanistan program. For theme (1) listed above, one must ask why the program "eventually evolve[d] to include women". It leaves the impression that programs for women were not deliberate but accidental afterthoughts. This is ironic, considering that USAID/OTI had a particular responsibility as it was representing the US administration who justified its invasion of Afghanistan with promises to "liberate Afghan women from oppression" (Carlin 2005: iv). Yet, Carlin's evaluation clearly documents OTI's capacity for "one-off programming" with too much focus on "rapid" and too little on "quality" (2005: 2).

Regarding theme (2), a change in women's status proved difficult to achieve considering that projects lacked creativity and seem to have arisen neither from Afghan communities nor from women (Carlin 2005: 19). Carlin further explains that women were not consulted about any aspect of the program and felt compelled to accept the projects that were designed to benefit them as a *fait accompli*. This was compounded by the fact that "no coherent strategy to support Afghan females was developed by OTI to demonstrate consistent, nationwide US support for the women whom US forces had apparently liberated" (Carlin 2005: 5).

Carlin notes that OTI "did not address the longstanding cultural and... political division between the genders" (2005: iv)[86]. She unequivocally states that "OTI would probably have benefited from a better understanding of Afghanistan's social dynamics, especially gender issues, and then targeted its program accordingly" (2005: iv). This demonstrates the propensity to offer technical solutions to political problems and the tendency for elevated claims that could not be met through these technical solutions. Further, it was noted that "addressing the needs of one segment of the population while ignoring others might have hindered rather than helped the healing and transition process that OTI wanted to support" (Carlin 2005: 2).

Regarding resistance encountered, Carlin reports that moving from program rhetoric to reality was extremely challenging and that the resistance was just as much from an internal inability to follow through on commitments as from the "conservative culture". It is interesting to note that the evaluation seeks to question the *raison d'etre* of the gender focus, considering the publicity that Afghan women received and the promised commitment to their 'liberation'. One concrete example of a promise that has failed to materialize can be found in the form of the Women's Resource Centers, a highly-touted USAID initiative.

Women's Resource Centers

Women's Resource Centers (WRC), also known as Women's Development Centers (WDC) by UNIFEM, are a joint US-Afghan initiative to create centers in each of Afghanistan's 32 provinces to provide a variety of services for women, including education, microfinance, basic health, and child care, amongst others. This effort is managed by the Ministry of

[86] I note with interest that even Carlin conflates sex and gender in this case.

Women's Affairs, the US-Afghan Women's Council, and USAID, along with other partners. The website of the US-Afghan Women's Council states that "centers will strengthen Afghan women's legal, economic, political and social standing and will also promote visibility at the local level of U.S. support"[87].

The OTI Evaluation states that a January 2003 agreement between USAID/OTI, the Ministry of Women's Affairs, and other partners outlined the US's agreement to support the construction of 14 (out of 32) WRCs. Land acquisition and land deeds dragged for months, coupled with bureaucratic and legal delays, issues over design and security – the lack of a security protection wall and guardhouse being a "major oversight" (Carlin 2005: 15). Two and a half years after signing of the agreement, only a few centers were open. To date, it remains unclear who will fund the rest of the construction and what will take place within the walls of the centers – and if women will even use them at all[88].

Carlin explains that "some of the difficulties can be attributed to the fact that the centers arose as a result of discussions in Washington, not Kabul" (2005: 15). Further, the public focus on funding for the centers drained money from other – strategic – programming that could have been channeled to Afghan women's own priorities. And yet, the rhetoric reigns. The USAID International Women's Day Special Report for 8 March 2006 states that "fifteen new women's resource centers now offer outreach and training for women in rural provinces to continue boosting women's social, economic, and democratic advancement" (2006: 3).

As a member of the AGG, I was involved in discussions on the WRCs from the onset. I distinctly recall extensive debates over land rights and building design and a notable lack of discussion on potential use of existing space in order to provide immediate social services. I also became one of the lone voices arguing that more time should be spent determining what was to take place within the walls as opposed to what the walls themselves would look like. As construction delayed further, credibility was lost due to the clumsy process and the derailed timetable. The WRCs have been much criticized as symbolic development, particularly as they constitute what appears to be highly-publicized and glorified office space for provincial level MoWA staff under the guise of actual training and support centers for women. At time of writing in 2006, function of WRCs was still unclear.

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[87] For more information, see http://usawc.state.gov/c7547.htm

[88] WRCs are located in provincial capitals and most women in the provinces do not have transportation to bring them to the capitals.

UNIFEM

The United Nations Fund for Women provides financial and technical assistance to promote women's human rights, political participation and economic security. The organization's stated goal in Afghanistan is "to increase opportunities for women that transform the development of Afghanistan into a more equitable and sustainable process"[89]. The organization seeks to advance women's human rights and gender equality. To this end, UNIFEM strategies entail capacity building of various institutions, building knowledge and action networks, and "experimentation on the 'how to' of achieving gender equality". UNIFEM works very closely with MoWA through "organizational development, gender training, research and planning in order to build its capacity to lead, facilitate, monitor and support inter-ministerial work on gender mainstreaming". UNIFEM is also working with MoWA on establishing Women's Development Centers at the provincial level. The website states that the "elimination of violence against women is a dream for every Afghan woman" and to this end the organization is working "in a culturally sensitive way" to bring this dream to fruition.

It was with great difficulty that I obtained the UNIFEM strategy paper. The strategy was never completed and remained in draft form. The following is an excerpt from a personal communication with a senior UNIFEM officer about obtaining the document:

> *We have a strategy paper for Afghanistan. And I am tempted to give it to you but I do not have the authority to do so. What should we do? Should you ask [the director]? Or should I give it to you and you will protect the identity of the source?*

The following is an analysis of UNIFEM's never-released *Promoting Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality in Afghanistan* draft of 28 April 2004. Despite their belief that a "clear gender strategy" is a "critical element" for Afghan reconstruction, UNIFEM did not release this strategy (2004). The report addresses "the gender community" in Afghanistan and begins with an introduction to the Afghan context, recognizing that, despite progress, conservatism is brewing. This return to patriarchy, though old and entrenched, is actually exacerbated by violence. UNIFEM writes that only when such conservatism is understood, respected, and

[89] For more information, see http://afghanistan.unifem.org/

engaged that it can be overcome. The strategy seeks to demonstrate measurable progress over the next four years (2004-2007) with the caveat that:

> *The pace of change will remain very slow for some years; this must be accepted by all. The standards by which we gauge progress must be reasonable and appropriate for this region and in light of the history and current circumstances of Afghanistan.* (2004)

The report fails to mention what actually constitutes "reasonable and appropriate progress". The strategy then recognizes the need for a gender analysis, approaching this with a degree of atypical humility. The report states: "We must never forget that we as a foreign-based agency have more than we realize still to learn from our national colleagues and partners about Afghanistan, and how to get things done here". And later in the document: "Institutions will come and go, but the people that staff them, and the public that uses them, will retain what they have learned" (2004).

The latter is noteworthy because it assumes that the "people that staff" these institutions are Afghans and therefore will remain in the country. The reality, however, is that these institutions are largely populated with non-Afghans, particularly in senior positions[90]. With this humility, UNIFEM also advises that the government create a national gender strategy. This was subsequently done in early 2006 – produced by UNIFEM and 'offered' to the government[91]. UNIFEM actually advises against performing duties in the place of the Ministry of Women's Affairs, and yet their actions contradict this. UNIFEM also exercises veto power over things gender, leaving room for this in a line stating that national input will be sought "whenever possible and appropriate" (2004). One might ask under what conditions it is *not* appropriate to advocate local input and ownership.

As the document is a draft, some sections are left blank. Interestingly, the section entitled *Outcome and Outcome Indicators* is blank. A question – presumably written by a senior UNIFEM staff person – is in this section in bold: "Ellen[92] what are we going to put here? Every copy I have of the draft is blank in this section" (2004). Also missing is the *Logistical*

[90] It is worthwhile noting that the perception of other actors in the aid apparatus is that UNIFEM monopolizes the 'gender agenda' and has exclusive and territorial rights over the Ministry of Women's Affairs, where all gender/women decision should, in principle, be made.
[91] This 'national gender strategy' – the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) - will be discussed later in this section.
[92] The name has been changed to protect identities.

Framework. It is relevant to note that the sections left blank are precisely the ones that will outline how the gender strategy is to be brought to fruition. The report does emphasize the

> *Pressing need to gender-sensitize media NGO staff and organizations and strengthen their capacity to develop gender-sensitive strategies and programmes, which take into account women's rights and interests and promote a public consensus on women's advancement.*
> (2004)

The document offers no further clarity on what this means, how to bring it to fruition, what constitutes a "public consensus", and why the media is the channel by which this should take place. The following reference to the media notes their use in monitoring changes. Finally, the report concludes with lip-service paid to the importance of public dissemination of activities. I say lip-service because this strategic plan cannot be used as a good example of public dissemination.

UNDP

UNDP has been present in Afghanistan since the 1950s, providing development assistance to the country and helping build the capacity of national institutions[93]. UNDP did not cease operations during the Taliban regime, delivering US$200 million of assistance to the country. Since late 2001, UNDP has delivered more than US$600 million of assistance to Afghanistan organized around three pillars: State-Building and Government Support, Democratization and Civil Society Empowerment, and Promotion of Sustainable Livelihoods. UNDP acknowledges that Afghanistan is still a country in transition and is therefore at a crucial point in its shift to longer-term development. On gender issues, the site states that: "UNDP works collaboratively with all partners to empower Afghan women and promote gender equality in Afghanistan, ensuring that gender issues are consistently mainstreamed and carefully paced".

In my search for a primary operating document, I consulted various UNDP staff, none of whom knew of any document that would qualify. One senior UNDP staff member explained: "We didn't have time to create one when we got here. We were too busy setting up

[93] For more information, see http://www.undp.org.af/about_us/overview_undp_afg/default.htm

operations and trying to do something." He further explained that the Country Action Programme would be well suited, although I could not have access to it. I have therefore elected to consult an array of UNDP documents to come to an understanding of their engagement with gender.

The *Note by the Administrator to the Executive Board of the United Nations Development Programme and of the United Nations Population Fund, Assistance to Afghanistan (2004-2005)* provided 12 references to women, most of which referred to women in governance and the judicial system. Nearly half of the references to women are an afterthought, and others are put to use in discussing past abuses. References to gender lack a definition and are sprinkled throughout the document in reference to gender mainstreaming, gender training, gender aspects (although it was not clear what these aspects are), strategic gender policies, and the government's gender direction (UNDP 2003). The report *Afghanistan: A Country on the Move* provided no more clarity on UNDP's engagement with gender and women. The few references to women offered no insight on program plans more than tokenistic mention (UNDP 2005). The *UNDP Country Program for the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2006-2008* provided many references to gender, most of which were gender mainstreaming. Again, it was implicit that – while neither a workable definition of gender nor a plan to mainstream was provided – aid interventions are best suited to do the 'mainstreaming' – whatever that entails.

Finding information on UNDP's gender program plans was equally elusive. In meeting with the International Program Officer for Gender and Disability, she explained that no one held this position before she joined UNDP one year ago. There was no gender policy, but at the time of writing there was one in process. This was not to be a public document, however. The Program Officer explained that this document was her own initiative and was born from UNDP gender policies and "tweaked for the Afghan context". In the meantime, she is conducting Gender Awareness Workshops for all staff at UNDP (700+ staff, from cleaners to senior management). A gender brochure was to synthesize all of UNDP's gender material and interventions and was to be available for public dissemination by late 2006. The internal description for the Gender Awareness Workshop follows below:

> *Development that is not en-gendered is development that is endangered... In Afghanistan, following the principles of cooperation of the Afghan Compact of February 2006, recommendations of the UNDP gender evaluation mission of June*

2006, in keeping with the UNDP Corporate Gender Action Plan and to promote the achievement of MDGs and the objectives of I-ANDS, we are making our own efforts to ensure gender is an integral and non-negotiable agenda at all levels of operations and programmes. This is also in line with the Afghan National Development Strategy, which has recognized gender as one of the critical cross cutting themes. Hence, with a view to making gender a "living practice" in UNDP Afghanistan, we have designed a one-day workshop that will be delivered several times over the course of the next few months (each workshop will have about 30 participants) to ensure that all staff are able to participate in these one day events. Participation in these workshops is mandatory.

I asked a senior UNDP staff member for his thoughts on the course and he said: "They've made the announcement that the course is going to happen and that seems to be enough. Of course it will get delayed and at the end will probably *not* happen". When I returned to that same staff member after the course to see what he felt about his experience, he explained that is was "UN-ese blah blah on gender relations" – another tick-box edict they were compelled to absorb. He believed that – internally – the gender training served to justify the existence of the Program Officer but that it was not likely to make an impact on the ground.

In the absence of a gender-focused document, the most thorough discussion of women and gender in Afghanistan can be found in Afghanistan's Human Development Report, written in 2004 and released by UNDP in early 2005 (2004). The report uses a human security lens to examine linkages between safety and dignity and livelihoods. The human security framework allows for an expanded definition of security beyond the absence of violence to include the ability of Afghans to access their basic and strategic needs. The report states that it should be used as a measure of accountability and a tool to monitor the performance of the aid apparatus in Afghanistan. The report opens with a note from the president of Afghanistan, Hamid Karzai, who begins with many paragraphs of gratitude and optimism, but concludes by saying that "the Government of Afghanistan may not agree with all the contents" of the report (2004: v).

Amidst a list of the report's various intended audiences, one group received the strongest recommendation:

> *...International aid workers, whose contribution to the stabilization of Afghanistan could benefit from lessons learned in other conflict and post-conflict situations. The historical overviews may also help development practitioners and members of the international community to better understand the complicated context in which they work.*
> (2004: xiii)

One would expect the aid apparatus to arm itself with this knowledge *prior* to commencing operations in Afghanistan. Given that the report was released in Spring 2005, this recommendation appears slightly belated.

The report issues a strong warning on the possibility of further violence due to exacerbated inequalities. Gender is listed as one such inequality that has been manipulated to fuel conflict in the past, and could be potentially volatile in the future. The report predicts that interpersonal violence will increase, "especially gender-based violence, as a consequence of the disruption of social structures such as families and communities" (2004: 7).

A two-paragraph section on "The Plight of Afghan Women" includes select statistics and segments on widows and the feminization of poverty in Afghanistan. A section on "Gender Discrimination" begins with useful information about the context of Afghanistan's patriarchal culture, male and female roles, the importance of viewing women as part of a family as opposed to isolated individuals, and finally the code of honor, linked to women. All of this information provides background for designing gender interventions. Immediately following this paragraph, the report lists two developments that are challenging gender roles and serving as catalysts for change. The first development, globalization, is opening up markets and media, and is channeling money to force Afghanistan to join the international community. Second, conflict is compelling women take on new roles as heads of household in absence of their customary male providers. The report states that these developments are expected to shift gender relations, yet it does not illustrate *how* this should happen within the Afghan context, particularly given the above explanation. It does not mention if these shifts are positive or negative. Finally, it does not mention if Afghan women want these shifts in the first place.

Also in the section on "Gender Discrimination" is a cartoon depicting two images: 'Yesterday' and 'Today'. Under "Yesterday", a man is holding up an oversized bag in his left

hand labeled "Taliban Rights" and two small (but equally sized) bags in his right hand labeled "Women's Rights" and "Men's Rights". Under "Today", the large bag in the man's left hand says "Women's Rights" and the much smaller bag in the right hand says "Men's Rights". This was originally printed in a local Afghan newspaper in February 2002. The Human Development Report explains it this way: "According to this cartoon, many men seem to be threatened by the attention and funding that is being directed towards women in the post-Taliban period" (2004: 81).

The thought ends abruptly and a new section heading begins. The report says nothing further on this subject. Following over 200 pages of detail – including substantive criticism of the aid apparatus – the end refers vaguely and unconstructively to "integrating a gender perspective" as a peace-building and conflict-prevention measure with no answer as to what a "gender perspective" actually entails nor how to "integrate" it (2004: 220). The UNDP Human Development Report for 2005 makes mention of Afghanistan in a more optimistic – and nearly contradictory – light, when compared to the Afghanistan HDR of the previous year. It says:

> *In Afghanistan there are encouraging early signs that improved human security is leading to opportunities for rapid recovery from the human development free fall it experienced during two decades of conflict.*
> (2005: 48)

The only danger, according to the report, is that the aid apparatus will lose interest and prematurely abandon Afghanistan.

World Bank

Afghanistan has officially been a member of the World Bank since 1955[94]. Operations were suspended at the onset of Soviet occupation in 1979 and resumed in 2002. The World Bank works closely with the Afghan government and administers the multi-donor Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF), the mechanism for coordinating funding of reconstruction activities. According to the website, over US$852 million has been contributed to the ARTF by

[94] For more information, see http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/SOUTHASIAEXT/AFGHANISTANEXTN/0,,menuPK:305990~pagePK:141159~piPK:141110~theSitePK:305985,00.html

24 donors. Since April of 2002, the World Bank has financed 19 projects, committing approximately US$893.2 million. The World Bank's Transitional Support Strategy (TSS) directly supports the government's National Development Framework and focuses on livelihoods, fiscal strategy, governance and public administration, and private sector development. The World Bank is also the largest international funder of the National Solidarity Program (NSP)[95].

Afghanistan's *Transitional Support Strategy* was presented by the World Bank on 12 March 2002. It remains the primary operating document for the World Bank's engagement in Afghanistan. The document makes 32 references to women, more than half of which do not refer to women deliberately. These include references to 'women and children' or 'women and men' in general discussions of Afghans. The uses of the term gender do not represent a contextualized understanding and lack any definition of the term. More often than not, the term is used in place of sex, for instances in the case of "gender gaps in social indicators" (2002: 4). The report refers sporadically to women's "vulnerable" status and to their suffering under the Taliban. Beyond language referring to "gender imbalances" and the subsequent need for "special attention" to be paid to women, there is little reference as to how to rectify imbalances. There is commitment that "the [World] Bank will undertake analytical work in gender as well as civil service reform issues" (2002: 18) but there is no understanding of what those "issues" actually mean and what purpose the "analytical work" will subsequently serve.

In 2004, the World Bank produced another tome on Afghanistan, this time focusing exclusively on the economic situation in the country. Women were relatively well integrated throughout the *Country Economic Report* when compared to the Transitional Support Strategy. In addition, several special sections were dedicated to gender and women. In a large boxed text entitled "Gender in Afghanistan – A Politicized Issue", the document made the following astute comments:

> *There are serious impediments to 'gender mainstreaming' in national reconstruction and development, including limited awareness of what it means, how to apply it, and who to draw upon for support. With gender issues having been highly politicized*

[95] NSP was conceived as the 'empowerment' program, and yet it has been met with skepticism and resistance, along with the suspicion that it is "a 'foreign' and anti-Islamic program which aims at religious conversion and abolition of traditional Afghan values especially concerning women and family". Boesen, I. (2004). From Subjects to Citizens: Local Participation in the National Solidarity Program (NSP). Kabul, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU).

during the past 100 years, soliciting or addressing the interests of women runs the risk, once again, of being seen as an imposed 'Western' agenda running counter to local traditions. In order to garner significant public support for policies and promoting gender equity, the discourse needs to be shifted from the religious to the social domain – and such policies must be seen as not running counter to Islam. The challenge can only be met through close collaboration with religious and legal experts, with professionals in line ministries, and civil society organizations across various sectors of society. The voice and initiative for making improvements needs to come from women (and men) within Afghan society.
(2004: 14)

The report continues to raise salient gender and women's issues throughout the document as well as in additional special sections such as a focus on agriculture and the gender division of labor, the particular challenges of female-headed households, and the role of women in revitalizing the economy. This report is included because it makes an unusual break from previous World Bank rhetoric. This document was written by a senior World Bank professional - an American man with a long-running interest in Afghanistan, extensive experience in the country over a 30-year period, and fluency in Dari. Further, during the author's first experience in Afghanistan in the early 1970s, he met and married an Afghan woman. It would not be far-fetched to assume that the author's contextualized understanding of the country and the people and his prolonged engagement in Afghanistan contributed to a better report.

The World Bank's *Country Gender Assessment*, prepared in March 2005, actually states that it is "not a policy document" and advises that "the challenge now is to formulate policies" (2005: viii) – a slightly belated strategy. The report is a self-proclaimed synthesis of existing information with mention of "gender-responsive actions" that could be taken (2005: xii). It then proceeds to outline the status of women in Afghanistan by sector (such as health, education, etc.) in terms of history, recent progress, existing efforts, and challenges. The analysis of the economic sector concludes with the following: "The traditional role of women in Afghanistan is a constraint to their more equitable participation in economic activities" (2005: xiv). That may be true on some levels, but Afghan women might argue otherwise as they prefer to operate within their "traditional roles".

The report presents a history of women's rights entitled "The Gender Context" in which the fluctuation of women's issues is presented. Absent is the relevance of this history lesson in present-day engagement with women in Afghanistan. The report further states that the "core strategy for women's advancement is defined as 'gender'" (2005: 3). The text abruptly cuts and resumes in the next paragraph with a lengthy quote from the Ministry of Women's Affairs on "gender equality". The former thought is incomplete, perhaps indicating an omission on the author's part. Still, it ominously reflects the vague nature of the term as it is used in such documents and the inability to define it effectively. It is not until page 99 (of a 128-page document) that a definition of gender is presented.

There are 203 references to gender, of which:

4 refer to 'mainstreaming'

46 address disparities, discrepancies, gaps, discrimination, inequalities

13 refer to gender roles

10 refer to gender relations

23 references to gender should be 'sex'

1 refers to "gender apartheid" (in the context of the US discourse)

Excluding the 23 references that should be 'sex', the remaining 180 references to gender are not incorrect, but they lack substance and a clear understanding of the term. There is little evidence of women's agency throughout the document. The discussions surrounding disparities, gaps, and inequalities leave the reader with the assumption that technical solutions will 'solve' these 'problems'[96].

3. Policy Formulation: Afghan Textual Analysis

The Interim Afghanistan National Development Strategy

The Interim Afghanistan National Development Strategy (I-ANDS) is the Afghan government's strategy for promoting growth and reducing poverty. It provides the framework for

[96] It is also worth noting that the author of this report prevented a World Bank working paper I had produced (at the request of the World Bank Conflict Prevention and Reconstruction Unit) from being published because she disagreed with the report's criticisms of the aid apparatus. She further questioned the extent to which the "perceptions" of 121 Afghan women and men could reflect reality. The manager who commissioned my report told me to seek publication elsewhere as he was "unable to go against the World Bank gender establishment" although he said he "liked the paper" and found it to be "a different approach with interesting insights not raised in most gender work" (personal communication, July 2007).

government policies and determines the allocation of resources. In 2006, the I-ANDS was beginning to undergo a process of consultations. The completed document - ANDS - will then become Afghanistan's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP). The I-ANDS also demonstrates the government's commitment to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as it adapts and integrates MDG targets "to the specific context and priorities of Afghanistan, [striking] a balance between ambition and realism" (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2005).

The I-ANDS is the most extensive and detailed government document in Afghanistan to date. It is superior to its predecessors – the *National Development Framework* and *Securing Afghanistan's Future* – because the government acknowledges their hasty preparation "with the result that consultation was hurried, and many individuals within ministries (and beyond) are not aware of them or acting on them" (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2005).

There are 90 references to gender in the core of the document (154 pages). I did not analyze the annexes or the consolidated program summaries as this would be redundant with the main document. Some of the 90 references conflate gender with sex (i.e. in use of "gender disaggregated data"). The others refer vaguely and unconstructively to gender terms without providing useful definitions. Examples include:

Gender mainstreaming
Gender perspective
Gender-related concerns
Gender-responsive approach
Gender training
Gender analysis

Gender is one of five cross-cutting issues: gender equity; counter narcotics; regional cooperation; anti-corruption; and the environment. Gender issues appear to be fairly well mainstreamed throughout the document, although there is a sense that these are strategically sprinkled where they might seem to be necessary. Gender is not linked to empowerment, in fact the latter term only occurs in the context of economic empowerment (six cases). The 139 references to women mostly include them in the context of other vulnerable groups. The document does not acknowledge Afghan women's agency. The

sense is that women are present in the document to ensure development gains across the various sectors. The women's component of the I-ANDS is the National Action Plan.

The National Action Plan for Women in Afghanistan

The National Action Plan for Women in Afghanistan (NAPWA) is a 10-year strategy that describes itself as the vehicle for implementing the Constitution as well as the international instruments to which Afghanistan is a party[97]. NAPWA is one of a series of Afghan government documents that "fosters women's empowerment and equality between women and men" (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2006: 8)[98]. NAPWA is the means by which the strategies and commitments made in the I-ANDS for women will be brought to fruition and implemented. To this end, it aims to present a series of achievable and measurable goals for women by sector. Or so it was explained to me.

I was part of a small team of four non-Afghan women tasked with writing the Action Plan's Executive Summary and full document. In working on the National Action Plan for Women in Afghanistan, an Afghan gender specialist[99] shared the following feedback in a personal email after having reviewed the draft document:

> *The NAPWA... is in some danger of coming across as very Western and top-down through the foregrounding of international instruments and concepts. This just means that there should be some care in the way NAPWA is presented. For example:*
>
> - *Relevance to Afghans and Afghan values needs to be clear from the very beginning rather than later otherwise we worry that the NAPWA would be too easily dismissed in early stages and not read through.*
> - *Western-friendly concepts like 'equal rights' are harder to justify among some Afghans because they would immediately dismiss it as impossible, as the Koran specifies particular and different rights for men and women.*
> - *Focus on women's issues sidelines men, yet they are the main group that must be convinced to make space for women. The benefits, ethnical/legal/religious*

[97] These instruments include the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA).
[98] Examples cited include The Bonn Agreement, Berlin Plan of Action, Afghan Constitution, Afghanistan Compact, and I-ANDS. Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2006). Interim National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan: Executive Summary. Kabul, Islamic Republic of Afghanistan.
[99] She was the only Afghan participant in that stage of the process, tasked with editing the document.

imperatives, and concessions relevant to men should be highlighted where possible in the NAPWA's introductory chapters.

And on a particular section of NAPWA that recommended a more equitable distribution of labor, she said:

> *The ideal presented in this is pretty far off from what is currently possible in Afghanistan I think. Women working hits male honor hard, and suggesting that men take over household duties is adding insult to injury, I think, although the final idea that parenting support should be provided for both men and women is good. Any way of getting to the final inclusive point by some other route?*[100]

In an electronic discussion on the NAPWA (and similar documents) building on the above communication, two international gender specialists had the following to say:

> *Specialist 1: Totally agree that men are feeling sidelined by the focus on women's issues, and perhaps many women are feeling alienated by the Western rhetoric that accompanies work with women. I am personally wary of use of the word "gender", as this has become synonymous with "women" (even for development practitioners who should know better!). Further, this term doesn't translate into Dari and has fallen into serious misuse!*
> *Specialist 2: Yeah! I've been noticing the same expectation problem more generally as a problem with donors, in that they have not adequately managed expectations through the media. We seem to share a lot of gripes about the aid process, but seems like we are the only ones!*

The full NAPWA is currently undergoing consultations and was expected to be completed in early 2007. The guiding document is the Executive Summary. This 21-page document gives a full overview of the different chapters as well as the process of consultation and implementation.

The NAPWA Executive Summary includes 66 references to gender, of which:

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[100] This text is a verbatim personal communication between myself and an Afghan woman gender specialist and editor of the NAPWA on 10 February 2006.

14 refer to equality/equity

3 refer to mainstreaming

6 refer to gender "issues"

3 refer to gender "policy framework"

6 refer to gender units and advisors

3 refer to "the gender perspective"

The NAPWA makes 166 references to women (as would be expected) and 21 references to men, nearly half of which are used to make negative comparisons. The document also includes 11 references to empowerment language and a strong focus on a human rights discourse throughout. Again, the NAPWA is intended to be a plan to guide concrete actions. It is an ideal document to conclude the textual analysis because it leaves no alternative beyond that of aid intervention to rectify imbalances and bring equality. Through the NAPWA, it is made clear that only the aid apparatus can bring 'liberation' to Afghan women, and that this 'liberation' can only come in the form of technical solutions that constitute the standard package of interventions.

4. Analysis

This section provides a composite and comparative analysis of the documents reviewed. For the table below, the first column lists the number of times 'women' has been used in the document. I consider only the main text and not other uses that might be redundant (i.e. Table of Contents). The next column contains the percentage of its uses as a stand-alone concept. This means that I have eliminated the following:

- Use of "women and men of Afghanistan" in general terms
- Use of women to make negative comparisons with men in reference to social indicators, such as "women's life expectancy is far lower than men"
- Use of "women and children" among a list of so-called vulnerable groups
- Use of women as an afterthought, often between parentheses, such as: (including women)

To this end, the second column identifies the number of times 'women' is referred to deliberately.

The third column lists the number of uses of the term 'gender'. Following a similar process to the one above, the fourth column calculates the percentage of uses of gender in its accurate form, not including:

- Use of gender to mean women, such as gender-disaggregated data
- Use of gender as an afterthought
- Use of gender in incorrect context
- Failure to define 'gender' and/or a sense that there has been an obligatory sprinkling of the term throughout the document

Finally, the documents are ranked according to a three-tiered system. This ranking is further reinforced by the percentages in columns two and four, as follows:

Low:	1-33%
Medium:	34-67%
High:	68-100%

However, the numbers and percentages are not intended to be a rigid measure. These are not as important as the messages that can be gleaned from these documents. Thus the ranking is based more heavily on the conditions below:

Low entails use of the words 'women' and 'gender' but no or limited understanding of the meanings and how to bring it to fruition. This category also entails a lack of contextualized analysis for women and gender yet heavy use of gender-related rhetoric. The terms 'women' and 'gender' occur in a tokenistic sense. Further, there is little or no mention of Afghan women's agency.

Medium includes a brief discussion of the terms and a limited understanding of women and gender concerns. However, this category represents those documents that lack concrete planning as to how to bring gender issues to fruition in program plans.

High demonstrates a solid understanding of gender and women's issues. The terms are used in relevant contexts - in particular gender is used in the robust sense of the word, including definitions. This category suggests a direction for programs and concrete action to be taken. It also represents a contextualized understanding of gender in Afghanistan.

Ranking Aid Documents

Document	# of times 'women' mentioned	Of which, % used as stand-alone	# of times 'gender' mentioned	Of which, % used accurately	Ranking
UNAMA: Situation in Afghanistan 2002	12	42%	7	100%	LOW
USAID: Afghanistan's Path to Reconstruction & Afghanistan Reborn	53	53%	0	0	LOW
UNDP: Assistance to Afghanistan	12	66%	19	95%	MED
World Bank: TSS	32	33%	11	100%	LOW
Afghan Government: I-ANDS	139	67%	90	77%	MED

The difference between these two tables is that there is no need to count uses of women as it is assumed that the use of the term is abundant. The content and relevance of the terms are therefore of greater interest. Gender as a term is included in the count however, because this is a contentious word that sometimes eludes definition in such documents.

For the analysis of gender documents, UNIFEM and UNDP are considered one entity because, as it was explained to me in a personal communication by a senior UNIFEM official:

> *UNIFEM operates independently (in terms of programs) but UNDP access its expertise (for free!!!) on gender. Logistically and funding wise, we are under UNDP system. But they charge us for the services... whenever we need it.*

And how it was explained to me by the Gender Focal Point at UNDP:

> *UNDP is the parent. We are doing gender - and women. UNIFEM is a part of UNDP, but they are doing only women. Yes, there is collaboration sometimes. We are trying to work together on some things.*

Ranking Gender Documents

Document	# of times 'gender' mentioned	Of which, % used accurately	Definition? Context?	Ranking
UNAMA: Situation of Women and Girls 2003	48	100%	No No	LOW
USAID: International Women's Day Report	0	0	No No	LOW
UNIFEM: Gender Strategy	77	100%	Yes Yes	MED
UNDP: not available				
World Bank: CGA	203	89%	Yes (late in document) Yes (late in document)	MED
Afghan Government: NAPWA	66	100%	No No	LOW

Conclusions

This analysis of texts from reputable institutions in Afghanistan is used to illustrate the similarities in the discourse and the pervasive extent of this particular discourse. The texts share a few key commonalities. First, they offer no definitions for terms used, or an understanding of the application of these terms in Afghanistan. Practical applications are notably absent, making it challenging for gender to translate from paper to practice. Gender issues might be sprinkled strategically throughout the documents, as in the case of UNAMA and UNDP, but the value is lost and mention is largely tokenistic.

Next, they offer no recognition of Afghan agency but instead leave room to justify their own existence by problematizing 'the women issue' in a way where the only solution is an aid intervention. The rhetoric uses gender terminology but reflects a women-in-development approach. In this case, women's empowerment is a means to achieve economic development. I-ANDS and USAID in particular use this approach. A parallel can be made between textual references to gender and agency and Walby's progression of engagement with gender issues from Chapter II. I extend this approach to address men's issues in gender programming using a five-phased process. The first phase, near neglect, sees men only as

perpetrators, and therefore women as victims. The second phase exposes the previous neglect, addressing men as obstacles to women's development. The third phase entails engagement with men only to advance women's interests. The fourth phase is that of exceptions: men who are advocates and supporters of women's issues. Finally, full integration of men – the fifth phase - entails working with men in their own right. Most of the texts sit in Phase One. Only NAPWA and UNAMA have evolved to Phase Two. None of the texts have moved beyond Phase Two.

The documents all frame women's issues as social problems, stripping them of any political content. And yet the texts all promise transformation that they cannot deliver on. Proposed transformation is not met by real interventions. Strategic interests are not embedded in the texts and only receive lip service without practical applications, such as the documents of UNIFEM and UNAMA. USAID's focus is on technical solutions with outcomes that are quick and visible (to US taxpayers). All of the documents treat mainstreaming as a technical project well suited for aid interventions. Similar to Molyneux's analysis in Yemen, institutions attempting to transform "operated with a limited conception of what this would entail", as will be discussed in the next chapter (1991: 251). This discourse marks another step on the journey that constructed an image of Afghan women. In this step, Afghan women's problems are framed as social, enabling aid institutions to create a situation to fit their standardized solutions (Ferguson 1994).

In the case of Afghanistan, it was not difficult to find the image that necessitated an intervention. Calls for 'liberation' were quickly met with technical packages of aid institutions. An academic discourse, on the other hand, might not have created the space for such packages. An examination of the academic discourses might have revealed Afghan women's historic ability to act on their own behalf. The lines between the academic and development discourses are blurred in practice, but the purpose is to reveal gaps in the development discourse that might have been found in the academic discourse (Ferguson 1994). It might be worthwhile speculating on the following: *If an academic discourse had prevailed in Afghanistan, would there have been room for a gender-focused aid intervention and public support for the 'liberation' of Afghan women?*

The following chapter addresses the specific discourses and discussions on women in Afghanistan that were employed during the period of study and that served to animate the aid apparatus. The chapter begins with an understanding of the 'liberation' rhetoric

employed in the media and popular literature. This is tested against the perceptions of 40 workshop participants and finally compared with Afghan men and women's own perspectives on those perceptions. As Beall aptly states, "the real potential for promoting women's empowerment and advancing gender equity lies in its practice" (1998: 235). Thus, this textual analysis and the following analysis of discourses and images take the discussion closer to an examination of policy implementation and policy effects.

CHAPTER IV: Discourses, Discussions, Images, and Perceptions

1. International Perceptions

> *For the next couple of years, the words* economic development *and* reform *danced on a lot of lips in Kabul... For a while, a sense of rejuvenation and purpose swept across the land. People spoke of women's rights and modern technology.*
> (Hosseini 2003: 38)

The above was written in reference to the mid-1970s, one of the many periods of attempted "economic development and reform" in Afghan history, where women's rights became a particular imperative before they were once again stripped away. The textual analysis of the previous chapter revealed discontinuities in analyses and assessments of the condition of Afghan women and how best to 'empower' them. The following discussion reveals how the concept of 'liberation' has been used in the media, focusing on how it has played a similar role in forming images of Afghan women.

In Arjun Appadurai's article, *Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy*, he uses the term 'mediascapes' to define "image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality" through which scripts of imagined lives can be born, helping to constitute narratives of the 'other' (1990: xii). Appadurai coins the term 'ideoscape' to define a concentration of images with political implications. Ideoscapes have to do with ideologies and typically employ ideas such as 'freedom' and 'democracy' that feed into the Euro-American master-narrative. In this sense, mediascapes and their more powerful brethren ideoscapes join forces to tell a story about Afghan women, a story that is transmitted through the mass media and subsequently through literature. It is this story that gains prominence, promoting an ideoscape that leaves no room for alternatives, no room for Afghan voices. This ideoscape thus becomes the master-narrative.

'Liberation' and the Media Narrative

Researcher Barbara Ehrenreich aptly stated that "women's rights may play no part in US foreign policy, but we should perhaps be grateful that they have at least been important enough to deploy in the media mobilization for war" (2003: 77). Indeed, the media plays a central role in drawing attention to or ignoring a conflict – or certain aspects of a conflict.

Afghanistan appeared to present an exception to the belief that gender issues are sidelined in conflicts and the aftermath – at least at the level of rhetoric (Kandiyoti 2005: 1). Media attention forms an impression that influences the way aid institutions approach gender issues in conflict and its aftermath (Mertus 2000: 19). Afghanistan presents a particularly interesting case in this regard. Analyses of the media surrounding the situation of Afghan women revealed a particular rhetoric that informed public perception, which in turn informed the design of aid interventions for Afghan women. Particular images of Afghan women in the media have served different purposes at various stages of conflict and aftermath. During conflict, Afghan women were portrayed as victims of a *chaddari*-obsessed archaic patriarchal order. In the immediate aftermath, Afghan women were believed to have eagerly embraced their (Western-bestowed) gift of liberation.

On 3 December 2001, BusinessWeek magazine released a special issue on Afghanistan. The cover photo showed a young Afghan woman, face revealed, and wearing a large smile. The word "LIBERATION" was written across the top of her head in capital letters. The caption read: "The US victory is a defining moment – for the Afghan people, for Western values, and for the cause of moderation in the Muslim world. Will we all seize the opportunity?" (Nussbaum 2001). However, alternative reports question journalists' accounts of 'liberated' Afghanistan, stating that journalists falsely reported mass removal of the *chaddari*, as if "unveiling was the main preoccupation... For anyone who knew Afghanistan at all, it was impossible to imagine women rushing to uncover their faces (Clark 2004: 92). Nonetheless, *BusinessWeek Magazine*'s opening article writes of the "major victory for Western humanist values", describing it thus: "The scenes of joy in the streets of Kabul evoke nothing less than the images of Paris liberated from the Nazis. Women taking to the streets to bask in the Afghan sun, free at last to show their faces..." (Nussbaum 2001)[101].

The author continued to describe the liberation moment as one that encompasses "human freedom", stating: "If this is seen by some as American hegemony, so be it". The author continues to explain that "the battle for Afghanistan changes the nature of the debate. Women are either free or not free" (Nussbaum 2001). The author frequently conflates Afghanistan with Arab countries. The repeated reference to Afghanistan as part of the "Arab World" and even as part of the "Middle East" is both erroneous from a geographic

[101] Whitlock also wrote of the 'liberation' of Kabul in 2001, stating that journalists deliberately sought out – and often crafted – images of women removing *chaddaris* and men shaving beards. Whitlock calls this "public unveiling" a reaffirmation of the Western image of the passive Afghan woman awaiting liberation as opposed to an active agent in history. Whitlock, G. (2005). "The Skin of the *Burqa*: Recent Life Narratives from Afghanistan." Biography 28(1).

perspective and careless from an anthropological perspective. There remains an underlying hostility among many Afghans regarding Arab involvement in their country[102]. This geo-political oversight did not bode well with Afghans and reflected a poor knowledge of the context. This was further exacerbated by the reference to Afghans as "Afghanis". While this may appear to be a common mistake, even the briefest time spent in Afghanistan will reveal that *Afghani* is the currency. The people are undoubtedly *Afghan*.

Several other articles appeared, all reinforcing the "liberation" perspective from different angles. One actually sites "the Muslim reaction" as if there might actually be a uniform perspective across the very diverse Muslim world. A further article reinforces the significance of liberation to the United States, stating that "these scenes of liberation provide a psychological boost to the US and its allies as they wage the war on terror" (Walczak, Crock et al. 2001). The article goes on to state that the US plans to maintain a low profile and use "Islamic peacemaking contingents and international aid groups" at the figurative frontlines. It becomes apparent that the liberation is really about the US with the following conclusion: "What remains to be seen is whether all that energy will translate into the kind of sustained aid that would put Afghanistan back on its feet – and boost Washington's credibility in a largely hostile world" (Walczak, Crock et al. 2001).

The situation of Afghan women was at that time an effective tactic to manipulate public opinion in the Western world (2002: 97), although the sudden feigned devotion to Afghan women on the part of the aid apparatus was political instrumentalization. Activists noted that Afghan women had been neglected for years, only to be discussed on exotic list serves and forlorn internet petitions (Ehrenreich 2003: 77), the most notorious of which, from a student at Brandeis University in the United States, was the first introduction that many American feminists and activists had to the 'situation of Afghan women'[103]. I received the petition 17 times from different sources in a period of two months in 1999. Excerpts from the petition follow below:

The Taliban's War on Women:

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[102] This statement is based not only on Afghan sentiments but also on my personal experience as an Arab working in Afghanistan. Knowledge of my ethnic origins was very often met with suspicion if not outright hostility. This subsided as soon as I explained my tenuous links to the Arab world and my commitment to an Afghanistan without the influence of foreign forces and ideals.

[103] For more information, please see: http://urbanlegends.about.com/library/blafghan.htm

...The government of Afghanistan is waging a war upon women. [List of Taliban offenses]... It is at the point where the term 'human rights violations' have become an understatement... Everyone has a right to a tolerable human existence, even if they are women in a Muslim country in a part of the world that Americans do not understand. If we can threaten military force in Kosovo in the name of human rights for the sake of ethnic Albanians, Americans can certainly express peaceful outrage at the oppression, murder and injustice committed against women by the Taliban.

STATEMENT: In signing this, we agree that the current treatment of women in Afghanistan is completely UNACCEPTABLE and deserves support and action by the people of the United States and the U.S. Government and that the current situation overseas will not be tolerated. Women's Rights is not a small issue anywhere and it is UNACCEPTABLE for women in 1998 to be treated as sub-human and so much as property. Equality and human decency is a RIGHT not a freedom, whether one lives in Afghanistan or the United States.

In challenging the *Saving Amina* petition, Jaggar criticized the "sensational language to denounce some non-western culture for its inhumane treatment of women and girls", explaining that such protest letters perpetuate negative stereotypes about Islam, inflame local sentiments and put those at risk in further danger (2004: 2)[104]. A parallel can be made to the Brandeis letter, yet there was no challenge or clarification received on this occasion.

Following the peaks of public interest generated by the petition and, years later, Afghan women's subsequent 'liberation', the media's interest in Afghanistan – and the *cause-celebre* of Afghan women – became limited to press-worthy events. Previous media analyses of the change in media focus on Afghan women through different periods of time indicated that press attention abated from late 2001 until discussions of the Afghan Constitution and the Afghan Women's Bill of Rights were proposed in October 2003 (Sultan 2005: 31). This attention was short-lived. Afghan women again hardly appeared in the media until the following year for the presidential election of October 2004. There was silence yet again for another year, until the parliamentary election of September 2005. And, predictably, without the anticipation of major events where women's participation can be showcased, the media will pay even less attention to Afghan women in the foreseeable

[104] Amina Lawal is a Nigerian woman who had a baby outside of marriage and was sentenced to stoning. For a fuller discussion of the petition and letter, see Jaggar, A. M. (2004). "Saving Amina" Global Justice for Women and Intercultural Dialogue, University of Colorado at Boulder.

future. A senior gender officer for an international institution reinforced this point, arguing that the aid apparatus has the responsibility to correct images that appear in the media that give the impression "that Afghan women are now emancipated and 'de-*bourka*'ed' through international intervention [and therefore] can be forgotten – again".

The presence of a few 'liberated' Afghan women in the media add to the dichotomy between 'victimized' and 'empowered' women – likely negating each other (Mohanty 2003: 248). The media has been periodically peppered with images and stereotypes about Afghan women – particularly in the context of Islam – since the fall of Kabul in September 1996. In fact, images of Afghanistan are not unusual. At varying periods in history, depending on the current political project underway, Afghans have been regarded as resistance fighters, bellicose warlords, and much in between. Such varied perceptions undoubtedly influence policy, especially regarding the degree to which the aid apparatus senses an obligation to 'save' Afghanistan[105]. The majority of those interviewed expressed strong views about media images. An international aid worker in Afghanistan explained: "The media has played a huge role in shaping people's perceptions of the plight of women in Afghanistan. For most, this is the only exposure that people have to Afghanistan".

A gender advisor with an international institution had the following to say on the subject:

> *I guess if we say that media and donor portrayals of Afghan women are negative it is in part because we conflate those portrayals with all Afghan women which is in itself a problem. I think aid agencies and the media must walk a very fine line between depicting the struggles that so many women face on a daily basis and portraying Afghan women as helpless victims, often of a barbaric culture. This seems to push women into a corner of defending themselves or their culture, religion, nation. That's a tough place to be in and one which seems to happen in many places.*

Media attention – even if inaccurate – can serve a strategic purpose. Attention can generate interest and funding for particular causes. According to the senior gender officer of a UN agency:

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[105] For additional information on this concept, please see Donini, A., N. Niland, et al., Eds. (2004). Nation-Building Unraveled? Aid, Peace and Justice in Afghanistan. Bloomfield, Kumarian, Smillie, I. and L. Minear (2004). The Charity of Nations: Humanitarian Action in a Calculating World. Bloomfield, Kumarian Press, Inc.

The less there is a focus on women's crisis, the less direct funding there is for women specifically. Without the horrors of the Taliban presence, less attention is paid to the progress being made by women and the support needed for that to continue. It is more or less business as usual, with some exceptions... The media definitely played on the image of the bourka, raising a lot of awareness about and sympathy for their situation. At the same time, women were portrayed only as victims, anonymous, hidden away. They were rarely portrayed with the kind of strength and courage that they really have, despite the bourka. As a result, some of the assistance offered them may not have been appropriate.

A further question to be explored below is what the implications might be for those who do *not* receive media and donor attention and how they seek out their own ways – positive or negative – to rectify these externally-imposed imbalances.

Literature on Afghan Women

It is possible to track the global feminist discourse – a part of the discourse that was employed for Afghan women – through an analysis of popular television and print media discourses (Mohanty 2003: 237-8). The various contributions to the literature on Afghan women also provide ample opportunity for analysis and an interesting starting point to the discussion. A brief and somewhat crude analysis of books on Afghan women since 2002 revealed an outcome that reinforces previously stated concerns with media misconceptions.

In an interview with a senior gender advisor for an international institution, she explained that the discourses and images employed by aid institutions and the media are "typical" and should not come as a surprise. She elaborated:

This is orientalism and this is racism... The media has to have shorthand ways because it has a short time to convince anybody of anything. I think it is kind of inevitable. I remember talking to the PR person in [the NGO] because I had argued as a policy that we would not show images of women in bourkas. I mean they can be in the background but this is not the dominant image. And she said to me 'But how else will we know that they're Afghan?' And I said 'But look at those pictures of women from Bosnia, from Iraq. You can't tell that that Bosnian woman is not from Iraq and that she's not from Kosovo and that she's not from Afghanistan because they all look

pretty much the same'. I think it's also the need to have symbols that are very easily translatable.

Book covers also rely on symbols that are "easily translatable" in order to entice readers. These books perpetuate images which may have certain effects. In a brief analysis of books using Amazon[106] as the search engine, and "Afghanistan" and "women" as the terms, 715 books emerged. As I began my search, I noticed a collection of book covers with images of women in *chaddaris*. I thus narrowed my search to books focused exclusively on Afghan women with a *chaddari* on the cover[107]. After I completed my search, I noticed that I was not the only one concerned about the use of such images of Afghan women.

Gillian Whitlock had also conducted an analysis of books on Afghan women, inspired by her visit to an airport bookstore, noting that "these texts are carefully positioned to project the gender apartheid imposed by Islamic fundamentalism towards a receptive [read: Western] market" (2005: 64). Whitlock states that these life narratives are specifically geared for a US market, and for American women in particular. "To pull Western eyes under the burqa in this way is a powerful rhetorical strategy; it elicits both sympathy and advocacy that can be put to quite different political and strategic uses" (2005: 55). The crux of Whitlock's argument is that these auto-ethnographies are put to use as propaganda to justify a military intervention with the surface objective of 'liberating' Afghan women from the oppressive clutches of Islamic fundamentalism (2005: 56). Many parallels have been made concerning the cooptation of Afghan women for the War on Terror[108].

The majority of books found in the search make mention of Afghan women rather than focusing exclusively on them. Therefore, this section begins with a brief description of some of these references. Frequent references to Afghan women include discussions of their 'inferior status', their abuse under the Taliban, their shared oppression along with other Muslim women, and US President George Bush's successful 'liberation' of the women of Afghanistan. For example, *Off with Their Heads: Traitors, Crooks, and Obstructionists in American Politics,*

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[106] I used the American version of Amazon, found at www.amazon.com.
[107] I did not include resulting books on Afghanistan that did not provide a cover image, nor did I include any of the myriad books on 'the situation of Muslim women'. Many of these books have provocative titles about Islam, veiling, etc. I also omitted published reports as these come without a cover image and are generally produced for the aid apparatus or academia. While this search yielded 715 books, not all of these are exclusive to Afghan women. They make mention of Afghan women, but are not necessarily devoted exclusively to the subject.
[108] For other examples, see Shapiro, A. (2004). Gender and the War on Terror: Partnerships, Security and Women in Afghanistan, American University. Ware, V. (2006). Info-War and the Politics of Feminist Curiosity: Exploring New Frameworks for Feminist Intercultural Studies, Gender Institute, London School of Economics.

Media, and Business asks: "Why do so few pay attention to the wonderful work the United States has done in freeing the women of Afghanistan from subjugation?" (Morris 2004: 147). This is followed by another popular misconception: "In Afghanistan women threw off their *burqas* when American forces arrived" (LeVine, Mortensen et al. 2003: 57).

Other books reinforce the image of Afghan women as victims. *The Mobilization of Shame: A World View of Human Rights* states that "among all the horror stories about the degradation of women around the world, the abuse of females in Afghanistan has a special place" (Drinan and Drinan 2001: 44). The book *Faith in Conflict: Christian Integrity in a Multicultural World* refers to the "savage repression of women in Afghanistan" (Ramachandra 1999: 43). Similarly, *Humanitarian Challenges and Intervention: World Politics and the Dilemmas of Help* discusses "subordinate women (for instance, in Afghanistan)", (Weiss and Collins 2000: 138). Another author, Katrina Vanden Heuvel, asks: "Are there any people on earth more wretched than the women of Afghanistan?" (Heuvel 2002: 164).

Finally, the most frequently reoccurring reference to Afghan women comes from a quote by Kipling, containing a rather different image:

> *When you're wounded and left on Afghanistan's plains,*
> *And the women come out to cut up what remains,*
> *Just roll to your rifle and blow out your brains,*
> *And go to your God like a soldier*[109].

This presents an entirely different image of Afghan women – as that of savages who, like their Afghan brothers, have tendencies to be ruthless butchers with a strong distaste for foreigners. What follows are but a few of the books on women in Afghanistan. They were selected because they represent a sample of the literature that focuses on Afghan women.

Latifa's story, My Forbidden Face: Growing Up Under the Taliban: A Young Woman's Story, presents a cover image of a woman in a *chaddari* with a close up of the mesh in the front (Latifa 2001). Harriet Logan's book also uses a similar image. These detailed photographs of the mesh covering over the eyes indicate that the book will bring the reader as close as possible to Afghan women (2002). These books use images and provocative titles to entice

[109] This poem, written by Rudyard Kipling, can be found in numerous books. It is available in full text here: http://whitewolf.newcastle.edu.au/words/authors/K/KiplingRudyard/verse/volumeXI/youngbritishsoldier.html

the reader with a verbal 'unveiling' and much-desired view of the 'forbidden faces' of Afghan women.

Some of the available books present women with *chaddaris* partially removed, in a seemingly willing effort to reveal themselves. One such example is *Three Women of Herat: A Memoir of Life, Love and Friendship in Afghanistan* (Doubleday 2006). The book's cover shows a woman peeking out tenuously from beneath the *chaddari*, and covering her mouth with her *chaddari*-envelopped hand.

The Story of My Life: An Afghan Girl on the Other Side of the Sky is about an Afghan girl living in the suburbs of Chicago (Ahmedi and Ansary 2005). This presents an interesting contrast because the cover depicts an unveiled Afghan woman, presumably revealing what she looks like on the "other side" (read: the 'unveiled' side, further read: the West). *The Book of Trouble: A Romance* is also an atypical example (Ann Marlowe 2006). While the title does little to reveal its Afghan focus, the book is actually a love story about an American woman and an Afghan man. The cover photograph depicts an unveiled woman (from mouth and below) enveloped in what appears to be Afghan fabrics, leaving the reader to assume that any engagement between American and Afghan equals 'trouble'.

Finally, a large part of the books on Afghan women present a full image of the *chaddari*, or several *chaddaris*. *Zoya's Story: An Afghan Woman's Struggle for Freedom* (Follain and Cristofari 2002) does just that, as does *The Silenced Cry: One Woman's Diary of a Journey to Afghanistan* by Ana Tortajada, with its lone white *chaddari* on the cover (2004).

Jan Goodwin's *Price of Honor: Muslim Women Lift the Veil of Silence on the Islamic World* presents the reader with three *chaddaris*, and is a focal point for a discussion on images and stereotypes. Just like Narayan's use of particular non-academic texts for her book *Dislocating Cultures*, I profile Goodwin's book because "it seems to have had a more significant public presence and influence than most "academic" writing, and not because there are no "scholarly" examples of these same problems" (1997: 106). The *Price of Honor* not only uses the image of the *chaddari* to entice the reader, but also employs the concept of honor – a sacred institution in Afghanistan – as something that comes with 'a price'. Goodwin's book opens with a chapter entitled "Fundamentally Different?" where she recounts the story of her inspiration to write the book, Maria, an Afghan refugee she encountered in Pakistan. Maria's

story is one of abuse, forced marriage, and a series of tortures. Goodwin is thus inspired to embark on her research to 'unveil' the mysteries behind the Muslim world. She writes:

> *It was because of Maria that I began this book. Was what happened to her merely a daily occurrence in underdeveloped nations throughout the world – children born into deprivation, raised in ignorance? ...Or was her experience intrinsic to her culture?* (2003: 6)

Goodwin uses many plays on words that lead the reader to the conclusion that Islam is in fact "fundamentally different" (read: fundamentalist) and Muslim women are oppressed because of their "culture". Throughout the book, Goodwin refers to Islam both as an "ethnic group", and as an "ancient culture" that is "rigidly traditional" and closed to "us" (2003: 25). Just like Japan, she writes, "it has its own way of doing things, its own philosophies, and, most important, its own religion" (2003: 25). There is little need to argue that Islam comprises diverse ethnic groups and *is* in fact its own religion. Goodwin's reference to Islam as a "culture" fails to recognize the pluralism of experiences - and cultures - within Islamic contexts.

Goodwin repeatedly juxtaposes the language of "us" and "them" to reinforce difference, writing that "despite the Islamic world's growing impact on our lives, foreign Muslims understand us far better than we know them". In addition to myriad uses of the veil, veiling, and its imagery, Goodwin describes the *chaddari* as a "body-bag for the living... which would eventually become an international symbol of the Taliban's oppression of women" (2003: 76). Said "body bag" will also be the galvanizing point for many American feminist groups[110]. Kandiyoti writes of the debates that ensued among transnational feminists on their roles in supporting women in Afghanistan. She explains that "these exchanges followed the familiar tropes of women's rights as universal human rights versus 'feminism-as-imperialism', reflected in a spate of articles in both the popular press and academic journals" (2005: 1). Afghanistan specialist Azarbaijani-Moghaddam reinforces this point:

> *Complexity and nuances notwithstanding, unprecedented international interest, misinformation, and hysteria have surrounded the situation of women and girls since the Taliban set foot in Kabul. In recent years Afghan women have been used by*

[110] Hymowitz's article reflects many of these issues, and also refers to the chaddari as "blue alien-creaturely shapes", to add to the imagery. Hymowitz, K. S. (2003). "Why Feminism is AWOL on Islam." City Journal, 2005.

countless media, political, and humanitarian entities, as well as publicity hungry women's rights' groups, to pursue their own objectives.
(2004:100)

Campaign Against the 'Body Bag'

Jan Goodwin's book is an example of literature's transition into policy. Goodwin's writings on Afghan women had a particular influence over perceptions Americans have of Afghan women, leading to her pivotal role in the launching of the so-called "Gender Apartheid" campaign[111]. As the researcher for the Women's Rights Advocacy Project in the International Human Rights Law Group (now called Global Rights), in 1996-1998, I was tasked with maintaining a close watch on the situation of Afghan women (from the vantage point of Washington DC). I was therefore present at Feminist Majority meetings, including those at the onset of the "Gender Apartheid" campaign. One of these meetings was attended by Jan Goodwin, who brought along a *chaddari* from her recent visit to Afghanistan in September of 1997.

As the only woman present who was not of American origins, I noted the manner in which the women recoiled from the sight of the *chaddari*. At that point, my knowledge of Afghanistan and Afghan women was limited, but my Arab background compelled me to recognize that the *chaddari*, like any act of veiling, represents drastically different things to different women and could not be taken at face value. During this meeting, the women present decided to cut pieces of the *chaddari* and wear it on their lapels as a symbol of solidarity with Afghan women. In addition to the *bourka*-swatch-of-solidarity (as it was nicknamed at the time), other ideas included the construction of a giant *chaddari* that would cover the Statue of Liberty in New York to represent the idea that America stands in solidarity with Afghan women, or perhaps that American eyes are covered as well. The symbolism was ripe for analysis[112].

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[111] For more information on the "Gender Apartheid" campaign, see Feminist Majority at www.feministmajority.org

[112] I do not dispute that the situation of Afghan women at that time was dire. Despite criticism, I credit Jan Goodwin and Feminist Majority for bringing to light the situation of Afghan women and for serving as strong advocates to raise awareness and funding in the US. Kandiyoti writes that "Feminist Majority's "Campaign to stop gender apartheid in Afghanistan" scored some US political victories for Afghan women's rights. Through a series of petitions and lobbying activities, they played a significant role in 1998 in persuading the UN and the US to reject formal recognition of the Taliban. They also put pressure on US energy company Unocal to back out of a $3 billion venture to put a pipeline through Afghanistan that would have given the Taliban $100 million royalties". Kandiyoti, D. (2005). The Politics of Gender and Reconstruction in Afghanistan. Occasional Paper. Geneva, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.

Regardless, it was apparent that while high-profile campaigning on behalf of Afghan women might serve well in terms of consciousness-raising, it created difficulties for aid operations on the ground (Benjamin 2000; Mertus 2000). Such campaigns, Jaggar has argued, waged by North American feminist activists limit discursive openness by centering their agendas around certain moral convictions therefore stifling debate. These agendas then become the foundation for the group's moral perspectives (1998: 8-9). Many articles, such as those by Afghan women activists Sima Wali[113] and Rina Amiri, were released during that time, expressing concern with the campaign and the possibility that it could alienate the very women it was trying to help. These Afghan voices were relatively silent in comparison, however. Wali repeatedly expressed her concern that "the true needs and wants of the Afghan people are largely absent from campaigns waged on their behalf in the United States" (2002: 1).

Popular Perceptions of Afghan Women

The "Gender Apartheid" campaign was deemed successful with the 2001 'liberation' of Afghanistan – and therefore of Afghan women – from the Taliban. Many years after the campaign, images of Afghan women as oppressed creatures beneath *chaddaris* still permeated popular perception, although the media's silence led spectators to believe that Afghan women had been 'liberated' and there was no further need to discuss them. One author expressed the views of many:

> *The veil was probably the clearest example of the perverse nature of media coverage... The fall of the Taliban has led to the virtual disappearance from the media agenda of the issue of the veil, and indeed of Afghan women in general.* (Dorronsoro 2005: 291-2).

Indeed, the cause of Afghan women had been taken up by North American feminists and subsequently forgotten, while Afghan women continued to struggle under external pressure to defend their agency and their cultural integrity. Meanwhile, Afghan women had "good reason to suppose that if their lives were to become the subject of feminist discussion, their

[113] Sima Wali is a significant name in Afghan women's circles. Wali is an Afghan woman activist living in the United States whose activism during the Taliban era and lobbying efforts towards the US government brought attention – and subsequent aid - to Afghan women. She is also credited with providing a contextualized understanding of the situation in Afghanistan and balancing the rhetoric of other lobbying groups. Wali is also the President of Refugee Women in Development, an international NGO.

own perspectives might be discounted" (Jaggar 1998: 10). Jaggar has been a critic of this sudden interest in the perceived victimization of women in non-Western cultures[114]. She argues that this "incomplete understanding distorts Western philosophers' comprehension of our moral relationship to women elsewhere in the world and... also impoverishes our assumptions about the intercultural dialogue necessary to promote global justice for women" (2004: 1). Indeed, there is arrogance in the notion that the aid apparatus knows better than the women involved about their needs and interests.

In March of 2005, I tested popular perceptions to better understand the extent to which these ideoscapes still held sway. I was invited to speak on the issue of Afghan women at the Women as Global Leaders Conference in Dubai, United Arab Emirates. At that point I had already been working in Afghanistan for nearly three years. I used the conference as an opportunity to gauge public opinion on the situation of Afghan women more than three years after their 'liberation' and their virtual disappearance from the media. The audience comprised 40 female participants, mostly American. They were conference participants who elected to attend my session on Afghanistan. Ages ranged from 15 to 68 and included students, academics, and development practitioners. At the beginning of the two-hour session, I circulated a questionnaire to the participants and asked that they complete it immediately. The answers then served as the starting point for the discussion on images of Afghan women.

When asked to describe Afghanistan after the Taliban, most agreed that the images that came to mind - in their own words - were chaos, great need, struggling, uncertain, unsafe, destruction. Examples include: "More liberated but severely underdeveloped"; "Power/leadership vacuum, very fragmented"; and "Reforming/reconstruction, democratization, US military presence", amongst other similar sentiments.

Their images of Afghan women mostly included the *chaddari*[115] and veil. Other answers were poverty, anonymity, and limited opportunities. The National Geographic "Afghan girl"

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[114] Jaggar gives the full picture of the history of this 'perceived victimization' over the last 30 years. For more information, see Jaggar, A. M. (2004). "Saving Amina" Global Justice for Women and Intercultural Dialogue, University of Colorado at Boulder.

[115] While most of the participants mentioned the *chaddari*, it is important to note that all of them used the word *bourka*. In fact, none of them were familiar at all with the word *chaddari*.

was also a popular answer[116]. More positive images included women voting, working in government, survivors, strong, resilient. One respondent said that there were "misconceptions outside Afghanistan". Many agreed that Afghan women are "oppressed but wanting change". It was interesting to note the contradiction in each answer as many conveyed the sense that things are bad, *but* could be good. For instance: "Hidden but struggling to better the life of their people".

The respondents largely felt that the media contributed to whatever negative images they might have had about Afghan women: "helpless women who don't have rights or privileges", in the words of one respondent. The media "perpetuated negative image of repressed women, veiled unhappy victims". They felt that there is currently very little focus on Afghan women, particularly since world attention has shifted to Iraq and other issues. Another said: "The media goes back and forth. We see images of women under the *bourka* but we hear George Bush tell us that women's rights have been restored". The media presented a biased and sensationalized view, victimizing Afghan women further. This sentiment summed up the views of many who noted a similar contradiction. She noted that Afghan women are presented "as either victims, or as victims-turned-success stories".

The respondents largely viewed the aid apparatus and its activities in Afghanistan as inconsistent and failing to listen to the needs of Afghans. Others were more critical, calling the apparatus "self interested" and using Afghan women as justification. There was broad consensus on the lack of follow-through and long-term planning. "The international community made a lot of promises which they have not honored", one participant said. Another added: "I think they forgot about Afghanistan with Iraq and the Tsunami".

When asked what aid interventions *should* be doing, the following two respondents echoed the sentiments of many. One said: "Build a long term strategy – actually facilitate the Afghan people with building a long-term strategy". And finally another said: "I think the US should have done a lot more before turning our attention to other countries".

Respondents agreed that there are obstacles for Afghan women including traditional roles, misinterpretations of religious laws, remnants of Taliban, patriarchy, gender schemas,

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[116] This famed picture of Sharbat Gula, an Afghan refugee in Naser Bagh camp in Pakistan, was taken by Steve McCurry in 1984, and soon became the international symbol for Afghan refugees and one of the most recognized (and perhaps exploited) images in the world.
See http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2002/03/0311_020312_sharbat.html for more information.

prescribed roles, bias against women, lack of security, entrenched power groups, lack of education, stereotypes, lack of opportunity, male-dominated society, illiteracy, intimidation, funding. One respondent urged that we examine context and spend more time understanding the socio-cultural dynamics of the country and its people. She elaborated: "We need more stories and analysis of leadership forms in Afghanistan. How do women there exhibit leadership, power, influence, etc.".

Can We See 'Beneath the Bourka' *Yet?*

The *chaddari* is not a new object of Western obsession. In 1985, Dupree wrote that women in Afghanistan during that time "dismiss the stereotyped image depicted by most Western media which insist on picturing Afghan women forever enveloped in billowing veils" (1985: 14). In November of 1997, Special Advisor on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women Angela King wrote the following in her report following an inter-agency gender mission to Afghanistan:

> *External observers and interlocutors often mistake symptoms and causes: the burqa, for example is not considered a major problem for most Afghan women with whom the Mission spoke, but is treated as such by many assistance workers in the country, agency personnel at headquarters and sometimes, opinion-makers outside the country.*
> (1997)

The *chaddari* should be viewed in its socio-political and historical context. There is much to be said about the role of the *chaddari* in Afghan history. A nuanced understanding will reveal that the *chaddari* can also be seen as a symbol of resistance. Its earliest uses by the Pashtun elite provided freedom of mobility and anonymity. During the Taliban era, the *chaddari* was used strategically "as a shroud of anonymity and disguise" to transport messages, weapons, cameras, and banned publications (Whitlock 2005: 57). According to the senior gender officer of a UN agency:

> *Empowering women is not a self-evident process... For many, the bourka actually protects them and gives them a freedom they feel they could not have without it. We as Westerners and development agents need to learn to disassociate the bourkas from oppression, need to acknowledge emotionally that Afghanistan is not*

the West, and need to support Afghan women in a manner meaningful to them, whatever that is.

Indeed, "more responsible action in the use of images is needed" (Skaine 2002: 29), particularly regarding the use of the *chaddari* as a tool to advance Western campaigns for Afghan women. The pervasive image of the *chaddari* was reduced to a symbol of Afghan women's oppression. As a result, many of those interviewed viewed representations of - and focus on - this garment as part of a larger confusion regarding the intersection between Afghan women, culture, and religion. In fact, the obsession with the *chaddari* obscured other gendered consequences of the Taliban's decrees for men. The Western construction of this garment fosters an artificial construct of Afghan men against Afghan women[117]. A gender specialist elaborated:

Too much focus can push women into a position of defending their culture and it can become a symbol of resistance to 'tyrannical Western influences' against 'good Afghan women'. It also simplifies the complex situation of gendered identities and roles within Afghan culture. By this I don't mean to suggest that women do not have less access to power or control of resources in Afghan cultures but that it's too simplistic to suggest that once women remove their bourkas they are free and everything has been made right.

The head of an aid institution working with women expressed it this way:

The world's image of Afghan women was that they were horribly oppressed and abused - the worst image of women anywhere in the world. This has continually fuelled programs attempting to help Afghan women. That bourka is the ultimate symbol of the backwardness of Afghanistan. Westerners gasp at its sight. There is nothing more reproachable in terms of the absence of women's rights. Even though the quantity of coverage [of Afghan women] has obviously reduced, the quality hasn't. It's still catchy to talk about how oppressed and wretched they are.

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[117] It should be noted that the Taliban also did their part to pit men against women by requiring that men enforce the edict that 'their women' wear the chaddari. Failure to do this would result in severe punishment. "In this way, the Taliban accomplish control over both men and women. They not only obliterate women's presence but also by usurping what was the purview of the family, they put to shame the men of the family, thus rendering them disempowered." Gross, N. (2000). The Messy Side of Globalization: Women in Afghanistan. Symposium on Globalization and Women in Muslim Societies. Library of Congress, Washington DC.

This garment can be credited with bringing much (read: largely Western) attention to Afghanistan. It continues to play a prominent role for the aid apparatus, particularly the Western media, producing myriad documentaries, articles, and photographs claiming to offer a glimpse 'behind/under/beneath the bourka' (Abirafeh 2004). This unconstructive image of Afghan women serves only to feed stereotypes and deny Afghan women's agency. The excessive focus on the *chaddari* "simplifies the complex situation of gendered identities and roles within Afghan culture," a representative of an Afghan NGO explained. 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". A researcher explained that the *chaddari* reinforced the pervasive view "that 'these people' are backward. The political currency of these messages is: 'look what they do to their women'. These images are taken as further evidence of the 'uncivilized' nature of Afghan society in contrast to the status of women living in 'civilized' nations'" (Hunt 2002: 116).

The head of an aid institution had this to say about the lack of contextualized analysis that informed operations in Afghanistan:

> *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 bourka.*

It is not unusual for any act of veiling to be misconstrued as a denial of women's agency. Afghanistan is not unique in this case. Many have documented a history of Western obsession with the veil (Said 1979; Narayan 1997). Despite this obsession, Afghan women repeatedly fail to conform to stereotypical images. The most facile of constructs is the use of the *chaddari* as a barometer to measure social change – or lack thereof. In my capacity as NGO director, I was approached my many journalists and asked to speak on the *chaddari* and explain why it remains in post-'liberation' Afghanistan. I clearly recall an incident with a journalist who noted the presence of the *chaddari*. He explained that, in early 2002, he felt that 95% of Afghan women were wearing the *chaddari*. He made this calculation based on his own estimations during his five-day visit. He had returned in November 2002 (for seven

days this time) and was sitting in my office, telling me that now perhaps 90% of Afghan women still wore the *chaddari*. As a result, he felt that I had 'failed' to do 'my job' in 'liberating' Afghan women. To him, the *chaddari* was the tool of oppression, the absence of which would be 'liberation'. The aid apparatus was the means by which this 'liberation' would occur. Therefore, the persistence of the *chaddari* on Afghanistan's streets indicated a failure of the aid apparatus to 'liberate' Afghan women. His words remained with me during my four years in Afghanistan.

In 2006, this journalist might note that the *chaddari* persists. And yet, as Afghan men and women will clearly articulate, the presence or absence of this garment does little to indicate 'liberation'. It is more important, however, to distinguish between the transformation of customs – such as veiling and the prevalence of Western clothing – and institutional change in the form of laws and women's sense of their rights and roles. In fact, one might assume that men have been 'transformed' based on the prevalence of Afghan men in Western dress. The change in men's clothing style does not constitute a 'Western' influence, or an indication of 'liberation'. Indeed, the assumption is that 'culture' is static when it comes to women, and that the sex of the actors is a determining factor in labeling a change 'Western' or not (Narayan 1997: 26).

2. Afghan Perspectives on the Aid Apparatus

Chaddari *Politics*

> *For him, women are only ghosts, voiceless, charmless ghost that pass practically unnoticed along the streets; flocks of infirm swallows... that make a mournful sound when they come into the proximity of men.*
> (Khadra 2004: 144)

In my October 2004 article, *Burqa Politics*, I argued that the *chaddari* had been used as a symbol to justify intervention and that it has since served as the barometer to measure progress – or lack thereof – in Afghanistan. Further, the *chaddari* and other forms of veiling have been conflated with lack of women's agency (Abirafeh 2004). Many of the arguments are not only still valid, but are in fact more relevant today.

Both Afghan women and men noted that the *chaddari* served as the image under which all others were determined. As part of my reflexive journal, the following excerpt was written in my capacity as NGO director in September 2002 to document my first impressions:

> *My sense is that Afghan women long for choice. The choice to wear a veil, or a bourka, or nothing at all. The issue extends well beyond the actual fabric of the bourka. It is more important to address the psychological bourka, and its progeny - the fear bourka and the poverty bourka. Social evolution is a slow process, and our task in this is to offer women the tools with which they can achieve self-sufficiency, a choice, and a voice.*

And yet, in 2006, both the choice and the voice were lacking. And the *chaddari* remains the preferred garment. Afghan women repeatedly expressed exasperation with this facile construct, saying that the world thinks "Afghan women are only bourkas". As a result of this image, the world felt compelled to 'save' them. An Afghan woman explained that the world thinks of them as oppressed and weak. This is not accurate, she said, "but the world wants to see us this way". An Afghan man elaborated strongly that the aid apparatus want Afghan men and women to have:

> *...Freedom like the Western world. Western women wear clothes, not bourka. So Afghan women should wear that too otherwise they have no rights. This is a completely incorrect image. We don't approve of it. Afghan men and women are Muslims and have their own culture and they do what is in their culture.*

It is interesting to note that during interviews, Afghans recognized that the word *bourka* was one that was used more frequently in the aid apparatus and amongst non-Afghans. They therefore used the term *bourka* when referring to foreign images of Afghans, but continued to use the more common term *chaddari* in their daily discussions with each other. This reveals the extent to which the preferred terms of the aid apparatus have become part of Afghan daily discourse.

Conclusions

As this chapter demonstrates, the liberation discourse played no small part in creating a particular image of Afghan women. This image in turn contributed to the design of programs

and aid interventions. As media and popular literature demonstrated – and as the focus group reinforced – these images served to create a picture of an oppressed Afghan woman beneath a *chaddari*. Such an image denies agency and did not resonate with Afghan women and men. These images and perceptions present a good starting point for a discussion of policy formulation from the perspectives of those actively involved. Given the tenacious nature of the perceptions surrounding Afghanistan and Afghan women, one might question the extent to which these ideoscapes have informed aid interventions.

Chapter V continues the discussion emerging from the data to better understand the journey of policy interpretation and implementation. Indeed, interviews with policy-makers and policy implementers, heads of international and Afghan NGOs, and Afghanistan specialists – Afghan and non-Afghan – revealed striking similarities and trends in attempts to put gender into practice. The next section takes the discussion of these themes to the policy-makers and policy implementers who operated in Afghanistan during the time of the research, addressing the lack of contextualization of gender, the agenda of transformation, the neglect of men, and the focus on practical needs. This discussion begins by checking popular perceptions and pervasive images against images policy-makers and policy implementers might have had of Afghan women.

CHAPTER V: Gender Policy in Practice: Formulation, Interpretation, Implementation[118]

> *Some interventions can be very disruptive. Badly conceived and facile analyses based on the assumption that Afghan women are vulnerable individuals living in a vacuum may eventually isolate rather than reintegrate women.*
> (Azarbaijani-Moghaddam 2004: 103)

1. Policy Formulation: Gender in Social Context

This chapter takes the discussion one step further to illuminate the journey from policy formulation to interpretation to implementation through the voices of 45 policy-makers, policy implementers, NGO leaders, and Afghanistan specialists.

Animating 'Gender' in the Aid Apparatus

Gender is a buzzword in the contemporary aid discourse that peppers aid reports, policies, and program plans. Among the Anglophone aid elite, "gender discourse was privileged and pure; the word women was *passe*... Never mind that gender did not translate well into many languages" (Staudt 2002: 57). In a discussion with a senior staff member of UNDP, he said:

> *We generously employ lots of buzzwords... like gender, I don't even know what that means. But I'm told I have to mainstream it. Even our 'gender person', she sits in her own container on the compound. She's not even physically 'mainstreamed'.*

Both the definition of gender and its implications remain under discussion in Afghanistan. And yet the term continues to be coupled with other ambiguous words – empowerment, equality, mainstreaming. "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... And that creates a reaction... It's the first thing internationals talk about, women, not gender".

[118] Segments of this chapter were previously published. See Abirafeh, L. (2004). Burqa Politics: The Plights of Women in Afghanistan. Chronogram. 10/2004. and Abirafeh, L. (2005). Lessons from Gender-focused International Aid in Post-Conflict Afghanistan... Learned? Gender in International Cooperation. F. E. Stiftung. Bonn, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

As a result, Afghans quickly learned that use of this term would guarantee them international support, regardless of their understanding of the concept itself and what it might take to bring it to fruition. The language animating the agenda of transformation has also been debilitating for some Afghans. According to one woman who runs an NGO for women, the rhetoric of empowerment leads the aid apparatus to believe that "we are here to save the poor victims, and [as a result, Afghan women] are so good at playing the victims." Indeed, Afghans understand what themes are 'marketable' in the aid apparatus, and using the rights words accordingly to achieve gains on their terms. The aid discourse is one that has been mastered very quickly by the communities. Women use the right words because they think that this is what foreigners want to hear, although the depth of the terms has not necessarily been absorbed. Men also use the language, as I observed in my work when, on many occasions, I was confronted with men who sought to start NGOs for 'women's empowerment' and approached me for funding. Communities are sufficiently informed to know that the presence of aid institutions is transitory and that they may need to subscribe to the lingo now: including women – on paper – to attract aid[119]. A woman head of an NGO felt strongly about the contagious nature of aid lingo and said that "Afghans are very good at saying whatever they think the donors want to hear - about 'empowerment', 'right to work' 'veiling issues' - and will ask for just those things".

An international gender advisor working with an Afghan women's organization illustrated the dynamic this way:

> *Many of the women I encountered wanted their position in society to be improved - through better health, better support - rather than changed. And I wondered whether they used the term gender because it was the term used most often by donors.*

To further complicate matters, there is still no agreed-upon translation of gender in Dari and Pashto[120]. In Dari, the most commonly used word *jinsiyat*, meaning sexuality, is still heavily disputed and is only used to fill a linguistic void. "What I see," an Afghan woman leader

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[119] Wakefield and Bauer aptly articulate that Afghan communities still exercise agency: NGOs consider how far they can push local values and beliefs to encourage women's participation, and communities consider ways to adapt NGO requirements to fit local gender norms Wakefield, S. and B. Bauer (2005). A Place at the Table: Afghan Women, Men and Decision-making Authority. AREU Briefing Paper. Kabul, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit.

[120] To illustrate this point, all of my business cards for positions with 'gender' in the title have been written as 'gender' in Dari, as if it has become a Dari word. I use the example of my previous position as "Senior Gender Officer" as case in point. 'Senior' and 'Officer' were translated. 'Gender' was not.

explained, "is that most people translate things from other languages and bring these things here. 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". Rostami-Povey adds further complexity to this issue by stating that the infiltration of English terms gave Afghans the perception that their language and culture was under threat (2007).

In a meeting on gender issues in June of 2006, Afghan women made the following points regarding the word gender: (1) The aid apparatus lacks a robust understanding of gender, (2) There has not been an agreed-upon translation, and (3) The word has became loaded with the perception that it is part of a Western-driven agenda and is used when it is believed that it is "what foreigners want to hear". Later that month, an update on gender activities was circulated, ending with confirmation of plans "to settle the definition issue". It is interesting to note that this issue was firstly, an afterthough, and secondly, still not resolved - four years into so-called gender efforts in Afghanistan.

Experiences based on the perspectives of policy-makers and policy implementers reveal that gender programs default to women's programs when translated into practice. Gender is not employed in the robust sense of the word. In aid interventions in the context of conflict and its aftermath, this is even more problematic as women as a category tend to be singled out in isolation from their wider social, cultural and family contexts. This point could not be overstated by those interviewed. An Afghan woman working for an aid institution articulated that "gender is a Western concept, or another word for women in Afghanistan". She continued to explain that aid interventions have not addressed the root causes of women's subordination and have therefore failed to impact gender inequality in any significant way. She said that "most mainstreaming approaches to women's development have not been based on analyses of the overall reality of women's lives".

An Iranian-American head of an organization working with women expressed the views of many:

> *I am sorry, but I am not sure I understand the difference between 'gender' programs and women's programs! I am tired of this whole 'gender' topic anyway. Seems to be an incestuous topic amongst a group of foreigners, having little to do with the*

realities on the ground there. I think Afghanistan is not the place to experiment with a Westernized construct of women's liberation.

Aid agencies... are just a bunch of propagandists that have mastered the art of talking for their funders, not for the people they are supposedly here to assist. It's such an embedded system, it is impossible to even step back and see how miserably flawed it is. The repercussions are that people are left with an overly backwards view of countries in the region. The aid agencies have gone too far in creating these clichés and now we are stuck with them forever it seems.

A head of an international NGO was trying to demystify the concept of gender to a colleague. She relayed the conversation to me:

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 give it the title '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.

An Afghan woman working on gender issues with an aid institution put it this way:

[Gender] is considered as a weapon against men – which is totally against the concept of 'gender issues' in the first place. Gender programs should be designed in order to reduce existing problems between men and women. Side effects should be prevented. The way gender issues are undertaken in Afghanistan now will not work. Because gender issues are introduced as women's issues, the whole gender thing is considered to be against the cultural and religious values of the country... To stop and change the present concept of gender issues in Afghanistan, gender programs need to be transferred to both women and men equally. For successful implementation of gender programs in any country – Afghanistan or not – a few basic things should be considered: religious values, cultural values, social structure of society, level of education, and techniques for implementation. Obviously, a successful gender strategy in the United States cannot be successfully implemented in Afghanistan, and similarly a successful gender strategy in Afghanistan can't be successful in Iraq. And, most importantly, empowerment of both men and women cannot happen by outsiders. Men and women should be able to empower

themselves to make choices and decisions. To reach this stage our society needs proper and successful gender programs within the framework of our religion and culture.

Many Afghan women activists believe that "talking gender and doing women" actually undermines efforts towards equality: "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. These things will again make men sensitive". The programmatic separation of men and women likely reflects a Western-oriented individualistic approach, and yet the rights discourse should dictate that, in the words of one Afghan woman, the same rights should apply for men and women as human beings: "Do not to separate them. People are trying to separate them". A dangerous outcome of this separation 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 working with an NGO explained: "Most of the people, they think that gender is making women in power and decreasing the power of men. Women over men". A gender advisor working for an international NGO explained that the idea of 'gender' as an abstract concept fails to manifest itself as equality. In fact, she explained that it was creating an imbalance between men and women:

In Kabul the reverse situation already takes place where women get supported in such range that men are falling behind also in the job market, women earn much more and get easier jobs than men. Is this what we wanted to do with empowerment of women? And is this the way to include men in this gender awareness process?

An Afghan woman implementing women's programs with an international NGO had this to say:

Gender programs are mostly failures. Gender training is never held for those men who need it. We are talking about big changes and transformation of women, and women's organizations are giving hundreds of little trainings for women but they are not taking serious action in making changes they talk about. Millions [of dollars] are being spent on conferences and seminars and this has made no difference in women's lives. There is still violence. Gender programs should have worked with men rather than women!

In the absence of thorough gender analyses, programs were unable to adequately integrate men – nor women. Extracting Afghan women as a target group sans context rendered both women and men's voices silent. It is important to note that gender interests are not met simply by adding both sexes to aid interventions. The addition of male and female bodies does not necessarily represent gender issues as I use the term in a more robust sense as a vehicle to understand and address women's subordination.

Opportunity Lost: Reaching Out to Men

> *Gender relations in Afghanistan are complementary. This juxtaposition – men versus women - reflects individual rights and a Western capitalist context. This isn't applicable to Afghanistan because traditionally there is coexistence.*

These words of an Afghan-American gender activist and researcher were shared by many. An Afghan-American gender specialist felt strongly about the importance of integrating men in gender work, as she stated in a speech given at the World Bank on 11 March 2002:

> *We need a full gender perspective because without men and boys, gender work is not possible... Be careful not to provoke a backlash. There are examples of this in Afghan history. Instead let the message slowly come from Afghan women themselves, not the international aid community... We can't empower women without empowering men, otherwise there will be a backlash again and it will provoke increased domestic violence. The more disempowered men feel, the more resistant they will be to change.*

This counsel was shared in 2002. In 2006, her words proved to be prophetic, as many believe that a backlash is indeed underway. As Chapter II has shown, attempts at engineering a social transformation will have serious repercussions for women as long as women's agency is denied. In conversations with Afghan women, many felt that there was room to work in partnership with men, to make gains in the contexts of the family and community. Indeed, policy-makers and policy implementers agreed, yet no one was aware of such efforts. In fact, many women working with aid institutions felt that an opportunity to engage with potential male supporters and advocates had been lost. In the few cases where men were involved, many interviewees expressed their initial surprise that men supported women in

ways that they had not anticipated. They elaborated to say that they regretted not having reached out to men from the onset. However, many aid efforts to target men often pathologize or essentialize them as deviants or as perpetrators of violence in the context of conflict.

Many advocated supporting men – in their own right and as allies to women – to make gains for women. In this vein, it is therefore essential to understand masculinities within a study of the gender order – and the impact of aid interventions on masculinities[121]. When men are studied, it is primarily the experiences of men in northern industrialized countries - the rest are rendered "exotically ethnographic". Research on masculinities could offer an understanding of both men and women and perhaps provide alternative visions of male identity in order to reduce negative effects (Bouta, Frerks et al. 2005: 91). Gender equality is not possible without men's involvement and support. This should be done with a view to reaching the fifth phase of engagement with men, as illustrated in Chapter II.

It is a particular imperative, therefore, to understand the role of men as participants in aid interventions, and the possible negative effects for women when men do not participate. While women's issues made gender visible as a category of analysis (Cleaver 2002: xi), there is a lack of understanding on the impact of such interventions on men. Neglect of men has political effects and renders the quest for gender equality futile. So-called gender frameworks are applied to focus on women and exclude men[122]. Coupled with a perceived male exclusion, this can result in a backlash against gains made in favor of women (Cleaver 2002: 24).

In preliminary understandings of Afghan masculinities, it has become apparent that men view gender equality as a zero-sum game, fearing that they will lose some of their advantage as a result. Conflict contexts reinforce a hegemonic masculinity. In the aftermath, men work to retain this masculinity, driven by a fear that their traditional roles have eroded. Studies of men in countries in transition demonstrate that men carry the burden of the role of 'provider' and loss of this role can be emasculating (Paci 2002). This is

[121] I use masculinities to define the various socially-constructed definitions for being a man. These are dynamic concepts that can vary over time and in different contexts. The term conveys the idea that there are perceived notions and ideals about how men are expected to behave in a given context. From Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children (2005). Masculinities: Male Roles and Male Involvement in the Promotion of Gender Equality. New York, Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children. As one example, Donna Pankhurst speaks well to the need to focus on constructions of masculinities. See (CITE- mainstreaiming gender in peacebldg)

[122] Moser's gender framework was cited as a case in point in this regard. For more information, see Moser, C. O. N. (1993). Gender Planning and Development: Theory, Practice and Training. London, Routledge.

compounded by the effects of poverty, displacement, and economic and social change experienced in the aftermath. As a consequence, men may seek affirmation of their masculinities in other ways, such as domestic violence (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children 2005)[123]. Interventions for women must therefore offer men alternative sources of domestic and political power and credibility (Cleaver 2002: 81-2).

For these purposes, it is relevant to understand that aid interventions do not operate in a gender vacuum, and that men are an essential part of gender efforts. Studies from other countries reveal that men have largely been absent from gender equality efforts. A study conducted in several African countries noted that those organizations that engaged men and women together succeeded in reducing not only male resentment over a focus on women, but also noted a reduction in domestic violence[124] (Range 2005). Respondents to the research frequently reinforced these ideas and expressed a desire to engage men in gender processes, and also to employ men as agents of change to work with other men. Many interviewed felt that they would rather reinforce, and not undermine, men's traditional roles. An international feminist activist explained: "Just like we are encouraging the government not to ignore one-half of its population - women - we need to start encouraging aid organizations not to ignore one-half of their beneficiaries - men".

An Afghan gender specialist had the following to say in an email to me as part of a discussion on work with men:

> *The way that women's roles are drawn in Afghan society adversely affect every aspect of women's lives... Men's roles in Afghanistan are also rigidly defined, leading men to bear the brunt of economic responsibility. It is also evident that Afghan men are increasingly frustrated and perceive the international community to be exclusively focused on women's rights without addressing the ways that the men have suffered from the decades of war... The majority of vocational training programs and foreign education opportunities are geared towards women. In the long run, it will be important to create programming that addresses men's needs as well as women. In virtually every post-conflict country, the presence of large numbers of unemployed and unskilled men and boys poses a risk to stability... More will have*

[123] The discussion on the possibility of increased violence against women will continue in Chapter VIII.
[124] Also see Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children (2005). Masculinities: Male Roles and Male Involvement in the Promotion of Gender Equality. New York, Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children.

to be done to ensure that Afghan men find constructive means of engagement and employment in society... [in order to prevent] the alienation of men and subsequent backlashes to women's advancement.

A gender advisor explained it this way:

Of the programs I have seen, most have had a women-only perspective – often with lip-service to male inclusion. I don't believe that strategy works best here. Emphasis should be on the inclusion and acceptance of women as community members first and foremost before focus is given to women's ability for self-determination and the often intangible notion of 'women's rights'... Personally, I myself tend to focus on women when thinking of gender and have a hard time really including men into the picture, which leads me to think that the problem might be in the application of the word 'gender' being that it is applied to practically any and all woman-focused projects or discussions.

In the words of an Afghan woman NGO leader: "The best way to make gains is to convince men to give freedom to women... Get their collaboration and cooperation, [and] any program will be successful". And another gender advisor lamented: "Stop excluding men that are qualified and can help women if we help them!"

An online discussion between an Afghan woman implementer in an aid institution and I illustrates the point further. I am "LA" and the Afghan woman is "SA" in this discussion.

LA says: What have your observations been about the trainings [for women]?
SA says: I noticed that the men are angrier because women are in training and they are not.
LA says: What do you think the men think about the women-focus?
SA says: Same as the women think. They see it as less effected, especially the gender awareness for women.
LA says: Do you think they would prefer to stay home and have the men work/train instead?
SA says: No, they prefer equal opportunity for both, because now the opportunities are mostly bound to women.
LA says: Would the MEN prefer to work/train while the women stay home?

SA says: I think yes. There are rumors about NGOs being not fair to men.

LA says: Why the rumors?

SA says: I know a woman whose husband is jobless, he will be trying to find job. He didn't like at first that his women go out at all, but later he had to let his wife join the training.

LA says: Because it was the only source of money?

SA says: Yes, and from our culture and people's point of view it's considered a shame for husband to sit and eat the money of the wife.

SA says: Though the lady did not point at this issue at all because she was afraid. But I heard it from her colleague, that she is not being treated well because her husband is being more aggressive since he is not working.

LA: Are there more women like her?

SA says: Yes. I think women will also not say the truth like that woman, because maybe [they are] afraid to lose the present opportunity of working.

LA says: What is the solution?

SA says: If there would be equal opportunity, that will be better.

Afghan women would likely argue in favor of the fifth phase of engagement with men, yet they were not asked because, as one gender officer and Afghanistan activist articulated, "we have failed to see Afghan women as possible active participants in their own futures".

2. Policy Interpretation: Afghan Women's Agency and the Myth of Liberation[125]

In the transition from formulation to interpretation, women's agency was sidelined while the myth of liberation gained momentum. In the context of conflict and the aftermath, it is not unusual for generalizations and stereotypes to prevail. Such images serve a strategic purpose but often fail to reflect women's realities. Analyses of context and understandings of local agency require time and commitment that humanitarian emergencies do not usually allow. As a result, the aid apparatus is often armed with preconceived notions and facile analyses. Many of those I interviewed admitted to misunderstandings of Afghan women, and a failure to understand how best to assist them. They also felt overwhelmed by stereotypes – many of which they often subscribed to. The senior gender officer of a UN agency warned: "It

[125] I borrow 'The Myth of Liberation" from a section heading in a report by Jean-Paul Faguet. Faguet, J.-P. (2004). Democracy in the Desert: Civil Society, Nation-Building and Empire. Crisis States Programme Discussion Paper. London, London School of Economics Development Research Centre.

behooves us not to project from our own perspective and assume that their lives are restrictive". The head of an international organization working with women explained that, even after these last few years of active engagement, "donors and Western implementers still do not understand the 'mind set' of the women of Afghanistan". She continued to explain that the aid apparatus was unable to view Afghanistan – both women and men – through a lens other than their own.

Agency Denied

The language of 'saving' and 'liberating' women in Afghanistan was not without controversy, implying firstly that Afghan women need to be saved and cannot save themselves, and further that they are being saved *from* something. Such language is problematic in that it may not only fail to achieve the promised 'liberation' but that it may do more damage than good for Afghan women. Rhetoric on Afghan women is inundated with contradictory images of survivor/victim, empowerment/vulnerability, dependent aid/independent change (Bouta, Frerks et al. 2005: 143). It is often sensationalized and fails to do justice to the complexities involved. An Afghan man with an NGO explained: "for us to judge Afghanistan as a backward society where women have no say is totally wrong". A gender advisor for an aid institution explained that facile labels - such as "backwards" - erroneously referred to the perhaps slower pace of change that Afghan women desired when compared to the fast-paced aid apparatus. This strong push for change not only denied their own ability to act on their behalf but also appeared to them to be a criticism of the 'Afghan way', "which in many cases it was". Attempts at engineering a social transformation will continue to have serious repercussions for Afghan women as long as their agency is denied in the process. Such concerns are not unique to Afghanistan. Mohanty presents a strong critique of the assumption that there is a homogenous notion of oppressed women in the 'Third World'. She explains that this in turn produces the image of an "average Third World woman", the antithesis of the modern, Western woman (2003: 22).

These judgments were in turn justified by the myriad "myths created and perpetrated by the Western world" – the most powerful of which was the idea that Afghan women are victims and *need* to be saved (Wali 2002: 6). The American myth in particular included some combination of belief in Afghan fierceness and pity for Afghan victimization. This is evidenced by the assumption that Afghan women – a favorite topic – are a homogenous

group. According to perceptions, the Afghan woman, as a largely unitary figure, came in two forms: either as a line of anonymous *chaddaris* waiting for aid, or as the occasional young and emancipated woman. In a 2004 article entitle *Burqa Politics*[126], I wrote the following:

> *The media and international agencies only present opposite sides of the spectrum: the few heroines who have attracted the media's fickle eye, and the oppressed masses who remain victims. Even this limited picture of Afghan reality fails to capture media attention today. Isolating Afghan women - from the burqa-clad to the lipstick-wearer - is not the best way to make changes and achieve gains. Focus on Afghan women is lessening, leaving the masses with a false perception that Afghan women have been "liberated" and our task now lies elsewhere. In Iraq, perhaps.*
> (Abirafeh 2004)

Despite Western perceptions, Afghan women have always been historical and political actors struggling against patriarchy. Their cause is emancipation – not only of themselves, but of men as well. Yet, in Islamic contexts, international pressure exerts influence on gender priorities and policies (Kandiyoti 1991), making it increasingly difficult for women to demonstrate agency in a context of pre-determined opinion about the status of women in Islam. This aversion, particularly pervasive in the US feminist movement, undercuts efforts to empower women. The implication is that after 'liberation', Afghan women will toss aside their *chaddaris* - along with their Islamic and Afghan identities – and become secular (Mehta 2002: 142). Afghan women have struggled and negotiated the various fluctuations in their social status throughout history, doing so within the context of Islam.

Many Afghan women are still struggling to find the space within which they can rectify this image and demonstrate their ability to act in their own interest. The head of an aid institution explained that "there is a seemingly uncontrollable urge to overlay the experience of 'the Afghan woman' with the Americans' worldview and to create programs that thrust that woman into the American design of what is good and beneficial for them". The head of an aid institution explained it this way:

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[126] *Burqa* was the preferred spelling of the publisher. *Chaddari* was not a well-known term and would not illicit the same response in the article.

Supporting women was not about understanding social dynamics. It wasn't about understanding the culture. It wasn't about the causes of poverty. It was very superficial. Many of the development agencies were appalled with what is happening with women. But then we never did look at it from a gender perspective. It was women under bourka. It was never about men in shalwar kameez[127].

The above quote raises an often overlooked but extremely valid point. Discussions of agency in Afghanistan are not exclusively about women. Discussions on policy formulation revealed that men's agency was also denied in the discourses promoted by the aid apparatus. Afghan women themselves reinforced this view, further articulating that the juxtaposition of "civilized American men to barbaric Afghan men" was based on the view that Afghan women were mistreated by their own men. As a result, "American men assume the role of the global protector of women, and by extension, civilization" (Hunt 2002: 119).

An Agenda of Social Change

Global protection of women manifested itself as an agenda to enforce social change, something that is not without historical precedent, particularly when coupled with the perception that it is externally enforced. Those interviewed generally agreed that the aid apparatus would do better to proceed cautiously and build on local momentum to ensure a solid foundation and sustainability. "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 interventions cannot be overstated. A socially and historically informed analysis could guide aid institutions in how to proceed – and how *not* to proceed – in order to achieve gains for women and men in Afghanistan. This includes taking into account that gender is defined differently in each conflict and in each context, and therefore basing gender-focused efforts on gender analyses of contexts. "Doing homework" entails not only learning about the communities aid institutions will work in, but also giving time for the communities to become acquainted with the institutions themselves, and 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 see what happens," an Afghan woman leader said.

[127] *Shalwar Kameez* is one name that is used to refer to the traditional male garment in Afghanistan.

"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 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". It was generally agreed that, in order to be sustainable, the process of social change must come from within. Under such circumstances, it is difficult to remain humble and neither overstate the roles, nor impose the particular worldview that animates the aid apparatus. Interventions must assess local demand and support for an agenda of transformation. Without such support, externally-driven change cannot be effective or sustainable. The haste of the aftermath period and the hype surrounding Afghan women prevented many institutions from taking account of Afghan women's perspectives. Many argued that it was not the message but the *method* and the *means* that were problematic. An Afghan man with an aid institution 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 specialist 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 addition to the aid apparatus *modus operandi*, their mere presence – as a diverse community of international women and men - has a social impact. The influx of non-Afghans from different countries brings customs and traditions that might appear to be threatening or challenging to Afghan ways. Further, the perception is that the influx of *kharijis* ('foreigners' in Dari) tends to travel hand in hand with alcohol, parties, and pornography[128]. An international gender advisor put it this way: "We are witnessing the interaction of cultures... 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 counterproductive - to lay blame on any sole factor, but many Afghan women have expressed concern that this new (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

[128] Elaheh Rostami-Povey speaks well to this, particularly regarding the social impact of foreign troops in Afghanistan. Rostami-Povey, E. (2006). The Reality of Life in Afghanistan since the Fall of the Taliban. State of Nature. Spring 2006.

a statement of what many Afghans think about the takeover of their capital by foreigners." (Johnson and Leslie 2004: 23). Chapter VIII will present more details on the idea of increased violence, particularly in the context of social and economic fluctuations – and frustrations - that accompany countries in the aftermath.

Despite being able to manipulate the lingo, Afghans nonetheless perceived these terms to be items "in the toolbox of those who were party to Afghanistan's wars" (Johnson and Leslie 2004: 77). In other words, the discourse took the form of an ideological occupation. As a result, Afghans became resistant to these discourses (not the concepts – an important distinction) because of their perceived ties to Western (largely American) individualism. The aggressive promotion of this agenda, and the means by which it is transmitted, therefore serve to generate further inequalities. Thus, it is possible to argue that – to Afghans – the quest for empowerment, for rights, for equality, for liberation is an aid-induced myth. In a report by Jean-Paul Faguet, under a section aptly titled *The Myth of Liberation*, Faguet refers to what he sees as the fallacy of liberation, namely that "external intervention can be used to lift the constraints that oppress society, allowing it to spring forth and democracy to flourish" (2004: 8). Successful economies and effective governments have, in the past, only been built on a foundation that includes social organizations, strong traditions, civic interaction, and an institutional framework. Imposed liberation, however, will only leave a vacuum between ideologies and real people. "The flower of democracy will not thrive in such a desert" (2004: 8). The 'desert' that Faguet refers to in this case – Iraq - could easily be extended to apply to gender interventions in Afghanistan.

A Democratic and Gender-Sensitive State

In such a desert, the aid apparatus sought nonetheless to fast-forward history: "It is not just the Afghanistan of the late 1970s it wants to piece back together, but a fully representative, gender-sensitive state – something Afghanistan never was" (Johnson and Leslie 2004: 155). The aid apparatus is indeed basing its 'success' on such a political project – the remaking of Afghanistan as a gender-sensitive state. Afghan women policy-makers, policy implementers, and NGO leaders have expressed concern about this agenda. In the words of the head of an aid institution:

> *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.

As previously mentioned, the Afghanistan of recent years has witnessed the aid apparatus repeatedly import terms that correspond to the latest aid trends, with little regard for their relevance in Afghanistan. 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 ideological frameworks as models for change – implying transformations that provide 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[129].

Amartya Sen effectively clarifies that it is wrong to assume that democracy and gender equality are Western products. In fact, there is "nothing exclusively 'Western' about valuing liberty or defending public reasoning. And yet their being labeled as 'Western' can produce a negative attitude toward them in other societies" (2006: 84). A speech by a political science professor at Kabul University articulated that creating an environment of respect for democracy and women's rights is not through the help of foreign countries: "It is a process of social movement according to the national values and historical values of a country" (Women and Children Legal Research Foundation 2004: 60). In this sense, the push for democracy is not unlike the pressures for gender equality – in seeming opposition to such values. The terms are used liberally, but without meaning and context. Molyneux and Razavi reinforce this point, explaining that this type of agenda represents a new form of Western hegemony, lacking content and effect (2002: 4). Afghanistan specialists Magnus and Naby aptly state that:

> *The internalization of democracy based on a Western individualism rather than traditional Afghan Islamic communalism, gender-blind social interaction, and the elevation of the individual above society, do not appear to be part of the emerging... Afghan worldview.*
> (1998: 22-3)

[129] It is important to reiterate that the above concepts do have roots in Afghanistan. Indigenous forms of Afghan democracy and gender equality do exist (the traditions of *Jirgas* and *Shuras* in Afghanistan present but one example).

As a result, 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). The outcome is that democracy – and gender – has been saddled with negative baggage, making men increasingly resentful and outcomes for women increasingly deleterious. An Afghan woman policy implementer put it this way:

> *Kharijis cannot try and change Afghan culture. If they do, it will bring more problems for women. It has brought more violence upon women. Women will ask for changes when they are ready. If a foreigner comes, she cannot help me. I do not think NGOs for women are such a big help. If an organization comes to help men and brings them work and training, it will be better for them – and better for women. But we must wait a long time for men to change. Every man is old in his head... [but] give them training and jobs, and then afterwards start talking to them about women.*

"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 make it into something which is politically correct but not accepted and understood by the people".

An Afghan NGO leader expressed the sentiments of many:

> *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.*

As the mini-case study on the parliamentary elections (found in Appendix 2) will show, it is not the underlying principles of democracy or women's political participation that are under question, but the way the terms are used as part of a Western agenda, leaving Afghans to adopt them publicly but resent them privately.

3. Policy Implementation: Practical Solutions

The case of the parliamentary elections serves as a good example to illustrate the transition from policy interpretation to policy implementation. In this phase of the transition, the discussion moves from the stated policies on paper – gender/liberation/empowerment – to an implementation that translated these ambitious agendas into a WID-style intervention, where loaded terms are at once depoliticized, replaced by practical and technical solutions. Indeed, highly charged and politicized issues will not automatically find resolution based on stated goals on paper. Further, such processes are not conducive to quick-fix solutions. An Afghan policy implementer working with many women's groups explained that international priorities – on paper - guide aid interventions in Afghanistan and these bear little relevance to Afghan needs and priorities. She expressed the views of many:

> *The means of aid in Afghanistan, in particular under this fashionable word 'gender', is totally focused on international policies and priorities. And these are more to show off to each other [in the aid 'community'] than to help Afghans. Though most of the fuss has been made about women, even less has been given to them. And even less than that is focused on their needs. So those of us who have to do the work are left trying to sift through the talk and seeking out ways to use the little left in hand as efficiently as possible.*

An Afghan woman NGO leader continued:

> *The influx of foreign aid workers [results in] decision making being done by foreigners who know less about the ways and customs and effective solutions than local residents. Local residents, particularly women, should lead the way. Aid agencies should provide the money and simply document progress to make sure the money is being spent on what it was supposed to be spent on.*

An international gender advisor explained the importance of working with all members of the community and sharing opportunities:

> *Raising a community out of survival mode and into economic stability will be of significant benefit to all members and will thus create a more conducive*

environment to address gender roles and relations. And more often than not, the community and family will address the subject without external interference!

Former Minister of Women's Affairs Masuda Jalal had the following to say on mistakes made by aid interventions:

The mistakes maybe have been not proper usage of resources. Not proper planning and targeting. Maybe they didn't have enough time to think about the investment that they were doing. Because it was an urgent situation, and emergencies are like that. But now we are not any more in emergency. In terms of women's status, it is the worst in the world. So in that sense, that is still an emergency. It is like Tsunami for women in Afghanistan. But still we need to take the time to think more about what we are doing and where and why we are doing it.

A reflexive exercise – a questioning of "why we are doing it" – could have been useful in illuminating the extent to which technical solutions were imposed by aid interventions to address political concerns. Policy failed to translate into practice upon implementation because the policy was largely strategic while the implementation of it was practical. As discussed in Chapter II, the distinction between strategic and practical interventions is relevant in implementation because, as Kabeer explains, women are not often treated as if they know what they need, with the result being that aid institutions tend to then make decisions on women's behalf. The default is to meet practical gender needs (1994: 230). It is therefore wise to question the extent to which aid interventions have penetrated the surface and challenged real power issues in Afghanistan, particularly as most interventions were not designed based on Afghan women's strategic interests, nor with Afghan women at all.

It has been argued that the true strategy in Afghanistan was that of military objectives under the guise of women's rights. In the words of an Afghan woman NGO leader: "The US government's loud and public promise that they will never again allow Afghan women to be forgotten has done damage. They still funded military operations much more than women's programs". Indeed, the link between the rights agenda and military objectives was not clear. In Afghanistan, the US policy is informally described as "sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll" to represent gender, poppy, and terrorism. This three-pronged policy has led to a conflation of objectives on the ground, and a sense among Afghans that the 'liberation' of women was merely a by-product of military action (Hassan 2002: 137). A report from a US general in

Afghanistan clearly exemplifies this confusion, stating that "the protection of Human Rights is a military objective" (McCaffrey (US General - Ret) 2006). If it is argued that women's human rights have been violated, by extension Afghan men are therefore the perceived targets of the "military objective". It is therefore not a stretch to understand how Afghan men might feel personally under attack.

Gender Anti-Politics

These experiences of policy implementation resonate well with Ferguson's observations from his research in Lesotho. Ferguson did not set out to present a critique of policy. Instead, he hoped to reveal outcomes – whether intended or not – in the light of planning. He viewed aid interventions as inherently political and linked to the distribution of power in terms of resources and influence. Ferguson argued that the aid apparatus viewed its own interventions as apolitical. His 'anti-politics machine' illustrates the way aid interventions are stripped of their political content, no matter how politically charged they may be (1994). The case of Afghanistan fits neatly within Ferguson's anti-politics framework. One Afghanistan specialist explained:

> *In spite of the predisposition of the international aid system to treat peace and development as apolitical products created from a set of discrete technical tasks, actual peace and development can follow radically different pathways and arrive at very different destinations, each of which will generate alternate sets of winners and losers.*
> (Stockton 2004: 30)

To assume that technical solutions can address Afghanistan's gender concerns is to ignore the most highly politicized situation of all. This type of linear transitional thinking was not well suited for Afghanistan's complex socio-political environment and served to ignore Afghanistan's overlapping social realities (Costy 2004: 162). The aid apparatus reflected its inability to understand the extent of the political project it was undertaking in failing to realize that its attempt to change women's roles and engineer social transformation through technical interventions would initiate a political response. With the unprecedented attention placed on the situation of Afghan women, it is important to understand how that attention has manifested itself and what effects this attention might have. It might be too soon to judge if aid interventions have helped Afghan women foster long-term transformation, and it

is beyond the scope of this research to pass judgment on perceived success and failure. It is possible, however, to understand the foundation of the initiative to determine what it actually intends to do. In this vein, the distinction between practical and strategic interventions is relevant.

And yet, the two interventions are indivisible. Kabeer reinforces this point, stating that "women's practical and strategic gender interests are not separate and dichotomous categories, but rather linked though the transformatory aspects of these different strategies for empowerment" (1994: 261). Despite the strategic language that was used, including the rhetoric for empowerment, ambitious interventions were destined for failure because the aid institutions charged with social change through their assistance to Afghans lacked the capacity and the political backing to deliver on such targets. They therefore failed Afghanistan far more than if they had gone for less ambitious targets and achieved them (Johnson and Leslie 2004: 157). The few gains that have been made for Afghan women in recent years have served to increase the presence, but not the power, of women. Demonstrations of strategic gender interests cannot be represented merely by the presence of female bodies.

The propensity of aid institutions to promote "'feel good', gimmicky programs with very little analysis" have added little value to women's lives (Azarbaijani-Moghaddam 2004: 101). Due to large amount of aid in Afghanistan during early phase of aftermath, it has been difficult "to resist the temptation of quick-fix projects that demonstrate immediate results" (UNDP and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2004: 215-6).

Poultry Projects for 'Empowerment'

> *Policymakers and implementers persistently take the road of least resistance, engaging women through their traditional gender roles and leaving inequitable gender relations unchanged. It should be obvious from looking at the last twenty years in Afghanistan that six months' funding for a handicraft or chicken-rearing project purporting to transform gender relations is utterly useless.*
> (Azarbaijani-Moghaddam 2004: 104)

Income generation projects provide a good example of this "road of least resistance", reinforcing traditional skills for women and focusing on low-paid gender stereotyped

occupations. 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. Income generation efforts 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". Nancy Hatch Dupree reinforces this point. She explains that "while antipathy toward work thought to diminish the family honor is strong, economic need often forces these prejudices aside" (2004: 328). In these cases, women are more likely to don the *chaddari* to use as a "shield to hide their discomfort when moving to and from places of employment" (2004: 328). David Mosse expressed it well:

> *Women workers faced a double trial. They were required to work in ways that challenged stereotypes and established new norms of gender behavior, while at the same time maintaining behavior that would allow them to command respect within the community. They paid a high but invisible personal price in fulfilling their roles.* (2005: 91)

Numbers are used to measure the success of income generation projects for Afghan women. These indicators drive funding, and projects that achieve their numbers are touted as a success. Aid interventions carry the whim of agencies who reset their priorities based on funding available. Implementers work to please their donors, not the women they are helping. While feedback on the success of income generation projects is mixed, Afghan men expressed their dislike for the initiatives, particularly in their promises for dramatic changes for women. This presents a further illustration of strategic rhetoric and practical implementation. One man expressed the views of many, saying that "Afghan women should not be the clothes-washers of foreigners"[130]. An Afghan woman echoed this: "After this

[130] Watkins explains that "only poorer classes, usually Hazaras, ever permitted their women to work as maids, so servants were and to a large extent still are males", thus it is not even appropriate for most Afghan women to work in

much work has been done and promised to women, all women are doing is washing clothing in the offices and that is it".

Practical and Strategic Interventions

Carlin's USAID/OTI Project Analysis, discussed in Chapter III, represents a good example of the distinction between strategic and practical interventions. The analysis lists 178 grants awarded to interventions "benefiting women and girls" between October 2001 and April 2005 (Carlin 2005). I was given documentation in confidence, which was not released publicly. Of 178 grants, nine can be considered to meet women's strategic interests. Again, I do not intend to be rigid about the strategic and practical distinction, and I do recognize the ability of practical interventions to have strategic outcomes. However, it presents a good point of comparison between the rhetoric that animated interventions and the interventions themselves. Carlin writes that "calls by the US Administration to liberate Afghan women... raised expectations that assisting women was to be a top priority" (2005: 36). And yet, 106 of 178 grants were for construction, reconstruction, and equipment. I do not negate the importance of construction projects as these do have a value (symbolic as well as physical) and take major resources that USAID is well equipped to provide. The point to be taken from these examples is the distinction between strategic promises and rhetoric and practical interventions.

One example of a strategic intervention merits focus. The grant - *Two Civic Education Workshops for Women, Bamyan Center* – proposed human rights workshops using the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Islamic Declaration of Human Rights, and the Afghan Constitution as foundations for the training. It sought to benefit 100 women and 50 men - both educated and non-educated of different social groups – in order to "raise awareness and understanding of basic human rights, enhancing women's status in Afghan society". The total amount requested was $3,645 USD (USAID/OTI/Afghanistan 2005: 6).

Examples of practical interventions include: *Purchase of Radios for Distribution in the North and West* ($127,000); *Ministry of Women's Affairs, Zinab Auditorium Rubble Removal, Kabul* ($9,477); *Micro-enterprise for Women – Poultry Raising Courses, Kapisa Province* ($19,269); and *Shallow Wells and Hand Pumps for Aunaba Village, Panjshir* ($82,910); amongst many

houses. For more information, see Watkins, M. B. (1963). Afghanistan: Land in Transition. Princeton, D.Van Nostrand Co.

others. It is worthwhile noting the difference in financial resource allocation to strategic versus practical initiatives in this case.

An oft-cited example of a USAID-supported practical intervention that was perceived to come at the expense of other initiatives is the Kabul-Kandahar highway. In the words of one journalist:

> *There has been a lot of talk of reconstruction and rebuilding, but this issue could only be understood if one compares the substance against the rhetoric and the large amount of money allocated for the so-called reconstruction. Of all the whooplas made of reconstruction... This hallmark of achievement that the US brags about was completed 40 percent during the Taliban government. While the highway is inaugurated, it still needs significantly additional work to remain intact. The inauguration of the highway was a political ploy aimed to convince the critiques that the reconstruction has been going smooth. It is hardly so.*
> (Miraki 2006)

And in the words of one Afghan man who expresses the sentiments of many: "There are more important things than the Kabul-Kandahar road for Afghans right now. We need a rich nation with a stomach full of food, not with its eyes full of scenes of buildings and roads".

In addition to the Women's Resource Centers discussed in Chapter III, one of the more contentious projects supported by USAID/OTI was known as the Afghan Beauty School, to offer women who are otherwise unable to receive training with "an opportunity to develop a sellable skill set that can support themselves and their families" (USAID/OTI/Afghanistan 2005: 25). The estimated grant amount for the beauty school was $44,685, not including support from international cosmetic companies such as Revlon, L'Oreal, and MAC. The grant description states that the program will benefit 60-100 beauticians and seven instructors every year (USAID/OTI/Afghanistan 2005: 25). This effort has since been "re-interpreted by the West as an example of women's liberation" (Herold 2006). An article aptly titled *Lipstick Liberation* was one of many that appeared about the highly-publicized initiative. It depicted a photo of a *chaddari*-clad woman with a caption that read: "Many women still choose to wear a *burka* [sic] to hide their unfashionable clothing" (BBC News 2002).

This controversial project – a 'pet project' of Western women in the fashion and beauty industries – benefited very few but gained so much press that it has since become an international film, with no plans of an Afghanistan release[131]. Following a dramatic and confusing fall-out between the donors and the Ministry of Women's Affairs, the school fell into anonymity alongside other 'failed' projects. The beauty school exists today in a much more muted form, although its credibility has been significantly damaged. It is, however, an example of an effort whose effects cannot be measured in terms of tangible improvements in lives and livelihoods.

The Database on Women's Projects for December 2001 to August 2003 sought to make the distinction between strategic and practical interventions to measure improvements by determining where money was going and whether empowerment was indeed the outcome. This was one of the first attempts to put women's projects together in a central space – it was also one of the first initiatives of its kind to employ an entirely Afghan team. While they recognized that not all projects involving women are 'women's projects', *per se*, the team set out to define what constitutes a women's project as opposed to other social projects. The database further distinguished those women's projects that focus on women's self-sufficiency from those that do not. This can be loosely applied to the above distinction between strategic interests and practical needs. Of a total of 943 projects in the database, the team argued that 394 projects will contribute to self-sufficiency (The National Center for Policy Research 2004: 17). If the projects are further divided along the lines of strategic interests and practical needs, as described above (with the knowledge that practical initiatives can still have strategic outcomes), the picture appears slightly different.

A more focused division of the projects and a removal of those that are focused exclusively on practical needs yields 193 projects that could contribute to strategic interests. The rest – agriculture, relief assistance, environment, art/culture, and so on – do not. Of the 193 projects that could be aligned with strategic interests, many of them were difficult to decipher. The final figure is therefore quite generous and may not accurately project reality. Despite the discrepancy in figures, the database team still concludes that insufficient attention has been paid to women. Amidst international claims that the situation of Afghan women has been the measure of progress in Afghanistan is measured, the database team calls it a 'silent yardstick' (The National Center for Policy Research 2004: 4). The team

[131] http://www.beautyacademyofkabul.com/html/synopsis.htm

presents a list of additional criticisms, including the very small number of project participants that are assisted by these ambitious initiatives and the focus, which they refer to as "temporary, one time and short" (The National Center for Policy Research 2004: 20).

Measuring Empowerment

How, then, can one measure a 'women's project' on its ability to foster empowerment? Kabeer cautions that interventions need to reflect on the concept of empowerment and how it relates to women's strategic gender interests (1994: 261). The Human Development Report cites measures of 'empowerment' from a human development perspective, but these can be extended to a focus on gender (UNDP and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2004). The following variables can be used to analyze intervention priorities in Afghanistan from a gender and empowerment perspective. A key factor is the extent to which there has been participation in the elaboration of strategies and implementation of programs. Clear indicators to the contrary include lack of consultation with communities, rushed design of programs in order to meet deadlines and access conference-related funding, and preparation of documents in English by foreign advisors[132]. Kandiyoti expressed it this way:

> *There is also a disjuncture between, on the one hand, the time frames adopted and outputs expected by international actors driving the women's rights agenda, and on the other, the length of time required for non-cosmetic changes in societal relations to develop as a result of peace-building. Since the issue of women's rights continues to occupy a highly politicized and sensitive place in the struggles between contending political factions in Afghanistan, this disjuncture may itself produce unintended effects, with disempowering consequences for women.*
> (2005: vii)

It is impossible to measure what has been achieved if funding cannot be traced and there is little understanding of the means by which policies should translate into practice. To reinforce this, a gender officer for an international agency said: "The general impression I get is that there is a lack of indicators and a lack of quantitative and qualitative tools for measuring change/progress. If you know of any, tell me!" She also expressed strong doubts

[132] The Human Development Report explains that aid strategies for Afghanistan were presented to Afghans as a *fait accompli*. UNDP and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan (2004). Afghanistan National Human Development Report 2004: Security with a Human Face: Challenges and Responsibilities. Kabul, UNDP.

that interventions had consulted women or felt that they were accountable to women. As a result, the aid apparatus might not feel responsible for what has happened since they intervened.

Research has demonstrated the limitations of aid interventions in their ability to foster empowerment for women. One effect is the perceived disempowerment of men. Cleaver states that "men threatened by such changes resort to domestic violence" (2002: 8). She questions "whether promoting women's empowerment at the expense of men is beneficial to all in the long term" (2002: 8). This will be elaborated in the next chapters through the voices of Afghan men and women, however such perspectives also emerged from interviews with policy-makers and policy implementers, although to a lesser extent.

An Afghan woman NGO leader urged that Afghan women comply with the country's social and cultural values because "any rapid changes could result in a revolutionary reaction". The senior gender officer of a UN agency elaborated:

> *There has not been an overnight revolution, a shift from oppression to liberation. Change does not happen that fast. Also, women are savvy enough to know that the last times there were dramatic and sudden shifts toward a Western model the resultant backlash undid any gains made. There is no need for a revolution, rather for a gradual evolution towards more gender equality.*

Conclusions

The following themes can be gleaned from this analysis of the journey from policy formulation to interpretation to implementation: interventions possess neither a clear understanding of the definition of gender nor the understanding of how to bring its programs to fruition. The de facto definition of 'gender interventions' is 'women's programs'. The agency of both women and men has been denied through attempts to import an agenda of social change coupled with the lack of contextualized analysis that accompanied program design. In practice, aid rhetoric fails to match implementation reality because technical solutions are offered to 'solve' political problems. This reflects a disconnect between policy and practice, and a further disconnect between an understanding of technical and political issues. The argument is not a simple one. To argue that interventions focusing on technical over political issues destabilized men's honor is almost counter-

intuitive. Interventions presented their goal as 'strategic', and in principle this should have been met with high resistance. But when these interventions manifested themselves in technical ways, it undermined men's sense of 'being a man' and ate at their honor. One might question how, if political interests had been met alongside technical interventions, Afghan women and men would have reacted. In this vein, meeting men's practical needs through technical interventions could have resulted in strategic gains for women by allowing them the space within which they can define and address their own interests.

This chapter lays the foundation for Chapter VI, which begins the discussion of themes that emerged from data collected with 71 Afghan women and 50 Afghan men on identity markers, definitions of gender roles and relations, and evolution of gender roles in different periods throughout Afghan history. Gender relations represent the most stark example of the difficulties of working in a context of rapid political change and slower social change, where international voices have the potential to supersede local priorities (Winthrop 2003). Indeed, Sylvia Walby argues that particular feminist movements are endogenous and generated in women's own interests, but the conflict occurs when the voices of the international political project – in this case the reconstruction of Afghanistan and the quest for gender equality – drowns out local voices (1997). To this end, Chapter VI starts with local voices to provide an understanding of how Afghan men and women define their own identities and priorities.

CHAPTER VI: Identity Markers and the Gender Order

The gender order is presented as a starting point and in this chapter is deconstructed in the Afghan context. This concept merits examination in order to illuminate the relations between women and men within social processes – in this case within the context of aid interventions. The gender order is a culturally, socially, and historically embedded concept that can change and evolve, as Afghan history has demonstrated. It is therefore imperative that the gender order is contextualized using Afghan voices to determine how men and women construct their relationships to one another and how these relationships might be changing in the aftermath. It is essential to recognize that these concepts vary between and within Afghan men and women. "To speak of 'the situation of Afghan women' is to generalize unconstructively" (Centlivres-Demont 1994: 334). Beall states that while it is useful to consider women as equal stakeholders, taking into account their needs and interests, it is potentially dangerous to characterize women en masse as they are just as likely as men to have opposing as well as complementary interests and concerns (1996: 12). She writes: "If women are singled out as one, singular group, specific gender issues get ignored" (1996: 12).

In her research on gender identities in Cyprus, Cockburn argues for greater attention to and a nuanced understanding of identities, their relevance and political importance (2004). Collective identities are formed through discourse and are defined by the power and persuasiveness of social forces that seek to enforce them (2004: 28). It is in this vein that the following examination of identities is conducted. This also resonates with what Geertz calls "seeing their experiences within the framework of their own idea of what selfhood is" (1983: 59). Molyneux argues that gender interests are not necessarily transparent, just as gender identity is not the sole identity, nor necessarily the most salient. Sex might not be a sufficient basis for assuming common interests (1998). There is therefore a need to engage with a more animated understanding of gender identities - particularly as compared to other identity markers – and their contributions to shaping women's and men's roles and relationships in conflict and the aftermath (Bouta, Frerks et al. 2005: xxviii).

Identity in Afghanistan is a fluid concept and has experienced shifts over time and in different phases of conflict and peace. An understanding of Afghan identity in the aftermath is an important starting point to determine the ways in which Afghans define themselves and how these identity markers are reinforced or sidelined by external influences. With the renewed focus on reconstruction, nation building and developing a civil society,

there is an increasing struggle for identity that merits investigation (Osman and Loewen 2005: xxxi). The term *Afghaniyat* represents the sense of Afghan national identity that fluctuates in different periods of Afghan history. *Afghaniyat* is not based on the individual but is deeply embedded in the collective units of the tribe, clan, and family. "These reinforce accepted norms of behavior and function as economic, political and cultural units that act on behalf of those who comprise them" (UNDP and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2004: 11). It is this collective nature of *Afghaniyat* that determines Afghans' sense of self and place in the world and how they deal with alien ideologies (Johnson and Leslie 2004).

Similarly, women's identity is also part of the collective. Despite this knowledge, and the myriad efforts to 'mainstream' gender, women are continuously singled out as a 'category' in isolation from their wider social, cultural, and family contexts (UNDP and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2004: 216-7). For a more thorough understanding, researchers on Afghanistan have suggested that it is worthwhile to examine the development of policies pertaining to women's roles in Afghanistan since the beginning of the 20th century. Nancy Hatch Dupree's study of the Afghan family in the context of crisis articulates that social institutions, such as the family, warrant investigation. Afghan women traditionally play the role of wife and mother, and the conduit through which Islam is passed from one generation to the next. "Yet with too few exceptions, assistance providers have made few attempts to unravel [identity] contradictions, even as they doggedly push gender issues to the forefront with singular aggressiveness" (2004: 311).

1. An Identity in Crisis

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", a married Afghan man explained. Attempts to separate women from family and community are met with strong resistance. It is neither possible nor appropriate to refer only to Afghan women since their plight is usually inextricably linked with that of their families (Barakat and Wardell 2001). Development for Afghan women is perceived in the context of interrelationships (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003). 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 sex reveals that it is superseded by other social categories and identity markers. "Key to understanding the Afghan notion of identity is that it is formed in relation to others: to family, to community, to

tribe or ethnic group" (Johnson and Leslie 2004: 30). 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, and ethnic group[133]). A head of an international NGO explained the importance of contextualizing identity this way:

> *We (the organization) work within the family context and do not talk 'gender'. I was advised early on by associates at USAID and UNIFEM to 'talk gender' to the donors but 'do family'. You express the issue of gender so well - change in gender roles vs. change in gender relations[134]. It cannot be emphasized enough.*

An understanding of identity markers is essential for policy-makers and policy implementers firstly because it explains how aid can reinforce divisions or cohesion, particularly in context of conflict and the aftermath. Aid interventions that have not taken identity markers into account could not only reinforce divisions, but also foster new divisions. Johnson and Leslie report that aid institutions in Afghanistan demonstrated their feeble understanding of the Afghan 'order' through the manner in which they sought to distribute aid. Lacking this knowledge, aid institutions sought to isolate segments of the population for aid, following which the community undertakes its own redistribution according to the social lines that make sense to them. The problem arises when aid exclusively targets one social segment and the community is not given the opportunity to redistribute (2004: 37). The notion that aid interventions might be divisive is not unusual. Aid can be divisive in the context of conflict and the aftermath when it is distributed according to crude divisions in society instead of based on opportunities for peace. In this vein, it becomes important to recognize where the particular fissures are in the society and where connections can be made. Such choices can determine whether the effects of such efforts are positive or negative[135]. These choices also carry implicit ethical messages. In the context of Afghanistan's highly gendered intervention, one might wonder what the perceptions the men have of the focus on women. These strategic and seemingly apolitical decisions end up sending political messages and destabilizing deeply rooted social structures.

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[133] Ethnic groups in Afghanistan include: Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, Hazara, Aymaq, Turkmen, Baluchi, Nuristani, Pashai.
[134] In this context, she is referring to my previous publications including the FES report, amongst others. FES is Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, the German foundation to support the social democrat party.
[135] The concept of 'do no harm' expands on this, arguing in favor of a contextualized understanding so that aid interventions avoid additional damage to those they are trying to assist. Anderson, M. B. (1999). Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace - Or War. Boulder, Lynne Rienner Publishers.

It was generally agreed that it is the responsibility of the aid apparatus and its policy-makers and policy implementers to understand that women in Afghanistan do not see themselves as individuals as much as part of the community and family. It is possible, therefore, to make gains for Afghan women by designing interventions that reflect an understanding of the context and that builds on these inter-relationships. On the importance of a contextualized understanding, former Minister of Women's Affairs Masuda Jalal had the following to say:

> *We are from the community. We know our community. We are better at finding the right approaches. We know the problems, we can recognize and identify them better. We know how to transfer the information in the right language, using the right words. We have this advantage. We will work better together than international community would alone. Reaching the last woman in the farthest place of the country is only possible if international agencies come together in partnership with us.*

Work on gender equality should be grounded in the local contexts and should understand the processes of socialization and historical resistance. Change imposed from the outside is strongly resisted, as experience in Afghanistan has shown. Working within the local cultures and traditions helps ground interventions in contexts that are understood. Reports and myriad examples explain that men specifically may be less resistant to changes when the changes are grounded in their own traditions[136]. Therefore, without assuming *a priori* that gender is the most salient category, the analysis of this data begins with the possibility that gender might not be a category of particular relevance in the Afghan context and that it might in fact extract women and men from their contexts. This research therefore seeks first to determine the social categories around which interests are articulated.

Afghan Identities

Magnus and Naby are among the few researchers who present analyses of Afghan identities. They explain:

> *The basic elements of the Afghan lifestyle depend on family relationships... and a sense of permanence, not of the individual but of the community. Loyalty patterns*

[136] For further information, see Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children (2005). Masculinities: Male Roles and Male Involvement in the Promotion of Gender Equality. New York, Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children. Also see Paci, P. (2002). Gender in Transition. Washington, DC, World Bank.

begin with family and extend to village or tribe, and then to ethnic group. The extension of loyalty to country has not achieved universal acceptance as has allegiance to Islam, which is imbedded in the community traditions... The definition of gender roles lies at the heart of maintenance of these lifestyles.
(1998: 18-9)

In line with Magnus and Naby, Anthropologist Whitney Azoy also explains the social principles on which Afghans find common ground. He cites kinship as the most significant institution in lives of Afghans, one where there exists a clear locus of authority based on the patriarchal structure led by the senior-most male, or *rish safed* (literally "white beard") (2003: 24-6). The concept of *Afghaniyat* is based on a patriarchal social structure whose foundation is the *qawm*, or collective unit based on dependents, led by the *rish safed*. *Qawm* begins with the nuclear family and extends upwards. Underlying this is the foundation of Islam, the strongest unifying force in Afghanistan. Nassrine Gross also examines the markers animating *Afghaniyat*, articulating that Afghan national identity is comprised of four separate identities: individual, religious, ethnic, national. Individual, in Gross' understanding, comprises family identity and traditional roles and relations. The second identity in Gross' hierarchy is religion, namely Islam. Ethnic identity follows, as "the guardian of the history of the social group, [teaching] the values and relations of the social group to its members" (2000). Finally, there is Afghan national identity: "at the cross-section of family, religion and ethnicity" (2000).

Due to ethnic conflicts and ongoing tensions, it is often assumed *a priori* that ethnicity is the most salient aspect of *Afghaniyat*. Contrary to these assumptions, the various ethnic groups have evolved into a fairly common culture, psychology and ethos (UNDP and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2004: 101). Even these seemingly-fixed categories have fluctuated over time and as a result of various political projects and powers. The fluidity of ethnic identity is a social and political construct, changing according to the pressure put upon it (Johnson and Leslie 2004: 52), as is the aspect of one ethnicity being traditionally more 'conservative' than others[137]. "War not only brought about an increased awareness of ethnic identity", Johnson and Leslie articulate, "it also changed how people categorize

[137] It is generally assumed that Pashtuns are the more conservative ethnic group. This leads to facile analyses assuming that all things 'traditional' emanate from this particular group. Such an example reinforces the importance of not taking ethnic identity at face value. For more information, see Johnson, C. and J. Leslie (2004). Afghanistan: The Mirage of Peace. London, Zed Books.

themselves" (2004: 52)[138]. Cockburn writes of a similar phenomenon in Cyprus, where ethnic divisions were initially fixed categories that passed without further scrutiny. She concluded, however, that: "Ethnicity... is best seen as an investment in cultural differentiation by particular social actors, often elites, with a political intention. For this reason, ethnic names... can never be taken at face value" (2004: 29).

The importance of multiple identities merits a brief elaboration at this juncture. Amartya Sen's book, *Identity and Violence*, argues strongly against a 'solitarist' approach to human identity (2006)[139]. Individuals balance many identities simultaneously, and any pressure to partition them under a sole identity label is futile. Sen clearly elaborates that choice of identity depends on context and is susceptible to external influences. These external influences could even go so far as to fabricate conscious difference where none previously existed. Sen further explains that singular affiliations of identity could be divisive, instigating social tension and violence. Sen's analysis can be placed in the context of Afghanistan's historical and political changes, where Afghan analyses of their own identity are likely to be impacted by the attention of the so-called international community on the country and its nation-building project.

It is in this vein, therefore, that the subject of identities is approached. I argue that aid interventions in Afghanistan indeed adopted a 'solitarist' approach to identity – in this case sex - and in fact made those in question more conscious of their sex, particularly in that one was prioritized over the other. Afghan women have been characterized as a singular group on the basis of a shared oppression[140]. The question that should be asked is to what extent aid interventions allowed program participants the freedom to prioritize their identities. To this end, I elected to begin the research by analyzing identity markers in order to challenge the assumption that sex was the primary category of affiliation for Afghan women.

Interviews were conducted with 71 Afghan women, selected based on their participation in aid interventions through local NGOs, and 50 Afghan men. Twenty-five of the men interviewed were husbands or male agnates of the women participants – fathers and

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[138] Johnson and Leslie cite the example of the ethnic group "Tajik", explaining that this particular label was applied to them by Western and Soviet ethnologists and is still not firmly used. There exists today a fluidity between the ethnic labels Tajik and Haraza, for instance. Works by Olivier Roy also address these issues.

[139] Sen defines a 'solitarist' approach as one "which sees human beings as members of exactly one group" Sen, A. (2006). Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny. London, Penguin Books.

[140] This concept comes from Mohanty's discussion of women as a category of analysis. To counter this, Mohanty makes a good argument for the analysis of identities as a source of knowledge and basis for mobilization. Mohanty, C. T. (2003). Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity. Durham, Duke UP.

brothers. Such interviews allowed for a more detailed analysis at the household level and provided useful comparison between women and men's perspectives. Twenty-five men were selected randomly.

The majority of the women interviewed (63%) originated from rural areas, were married (55%), and have no education (59%). They represent diverse ethnic groups and age groups. None of the men interviewed were engaged in aid interventions. The majority of the men also came from rural areas (66%) and were married (56%). However, the majority of the men have seven or more years of education. This reflects Afghan realities as boys' education is prioritized over that of girls. Human Rights Watch states that in 2004, 20% of boys were in school compared to 5% of girls (2006). As with the women, their ages and ethnic groups varied.

The discussion began by asking participants to rank five different aspects of their identity in order of importance to them[141]. The options were as follows:

- National Identity
- Religious Identity
- Ethnic/Tribal Identity
- Sex
- Family Identity

The rationale behind this exercise was to come to a better understanding of how Afghans value particular aspects of their identities. Asking respondents to prioritize one identity as the most important does not intend to negate the existence of multiple identities simultaneously, nor does it ignore the fact that identities and affiliations change in time and in different contexts. This aspect of the research simply demonstrates that the artificial divisions in programming based on sex might not have been valid for some participants. It might have, in fact, extracted women and men from their social roles and challenged their other, perhaps stronger, affiliations.

Religious identity ranked first for both women and men as the primary social category within which they were more closely affiliated. The majority of the women interviewed placed their

[141] Please refer to the Methodology (Appendix I) for tables providing a demographic breakdown of those interviewed.

Afghan identity as second, followed by ethnicity. Sex and family ranked at the lower end of the spectrum.

Identity Ranking – Women

Identity Ranking – Women	Number of Votes (out of 71)	Percentage of Total for Women
1. Religion	34	48%
2. Afghan	16	23%
3. Ethnicity	15	20%
4. Sex	5	6%
5. Family	2	3%

Men ranked identity markers similar to women. Religion received the majority vote (60%). Afghan identity was tied with family affiliations. Sex received 6% of the vote, followed by ethnicity at 2%.

Identity Ranking – Men

Identity Ranking – Men	Number of Votes (out of 50)	Percentage of Total for Men
1. Religion	30	60%
2. Afghan/Family	8	16%
3. Sex	3	6%
4. Ethnicity	1	2%

The Role of Islam[142]

> *Religion has always pervaded Afghan daily life, and in this society everyone knows perfectly well what is proper and what is not... Afghans are intent on maintaining their tradition through... the relationships between men and women.*
> (Delloye 2003: 17)

The ranking of religious identity reflects the prominence Islam has in Afghanistan, and the consequences if Islam is sidelined or perceived to be so, as Afghan history aptly demonstrates. Anthropologist Azza Karam writes that "the importance of religious identities is insufficiently analyzed and little understood" in her work on Islamisms (2000: 50).

[142] Segments of this section were previously published. Abirafeh, L. (2003). "The Role of Religion in the Lives of Women in the New Afghanistan." Critical Half 1(1).

The role of religion is therefore deserving of particular focus, given its prominence in the lives of Afghan women and men. In dialogues with Afghan women, they frequently repeated that they are Muslim and choose to define themselves within the context of Islam and its prescribed roles for women. They defined Islam as a "complete religion", and expressed that they are content within its parameters, electing freely to abide by its tenets. "Islam is the primary point of guidance", one woman articulated. "Without it, there cannot be progress". Many men said that their religion is "everything" to them, and therefore those of a different religion are "outside of [Afghan] society's laws".

Most women argued that their role in Islam is no different from that of a man, stating that it is the duty of both women and men to be good Muslims. "There is no difference between Allah's creatures," one woman explained. Afghan women in the focus groups felt strongly that Islam, more than any other religion, guarantees equal rights to men and women. "Women have the right to work, to study. Women have lots of rights," they said. "Women have rights in Islam. They can work outside of the house," one woman added. Women explained that they prefer to find ways to defend their rights within an Islamic context. They want to search for answers in the Koran, or through another practicing Muslim. And they want to know more about Islam and the rights that it affords them. One woman explained: "When a baby is born, the family says 'you are Muslim, you are Muslim' but the child is never taught why... so they have a hard time differentiating between the culture and religion". In Afghanistan, this line is further blurred as tribal customs merge Islam with their own practices. Norms governing women in Afghanistan are often based on tribal codes that trump Islamic laws - particularly in the case of Islam's more enlightened messages on women[143]. A woman explained the dynamic this way: "There are lots of rules for women in Islam, but people weren't educated enough and didn't have much information about their religion. So people preached some wrong words about Islam."

Discussions on the role of Islam in Afghanistan quickly became expressions of duty to safeguard the religion and concern that it could once again be threatened by occupying regimes. Many respondents evoked their historic responsibility to defend and protect the religion from "outside interference". For example, one young woman originating from rural Afghanistan explained: "Our ancestors have always struggled to receive this religion and we

[143] Chapter VII includes a further discussion on *Pashtunwali*.

are responsible to save it". Most men expressed a strong need to safeguard Islam – particularly its measures regarding women - from foreign interference and influence[144]. One younger man put it this way: "Religion is an important factor for Muslims. To defend it they will sacrifice everything". "Islam provides and respects any opportunities for women, but unfortunately a non-respectable culture has been mixed with Islam," one woman said[145]. Many Mullahs are to blame, they say. "They want to change Islam and mix it with culture and custom". Respondents viewed the Taliban as a manifestation of foreign influence that has 'soiled' the true nature of Islam. "They tried to act like Muslims and they tried to alter Islam and disrespect the culture of Afghanistan," one woman said. "During the Taliban regime, it was just the name of Islam, but not real Islam. They were like wild animals". "All of their ideas were wrong. They said that women should wear the *chaddari*. They said we must cover. All things were wrong." "Taliban regime was a dark regime," one woman said. "They forced people to do things that they wanted". Many women were quick to blame "invading cultures and customs" for polluting the Afghan version of Islam. The women strongly expressed a dislike for foreign intervention and a desire to regain Afghan autonomy.

Similar to the interviews, Islam emerged as the unanimous choice of primary identity in all focus groups[146]. Clearly, the importance of operating firstly within the context of Islam cannot be overstated. In fact, many respondents felt that aid interventions "failed to operate within the Muslim context" and – more seriously – "lured Afghans away from Islam". One woman explained that the fear of aid institutions being perceived and therefore labeled as un-Islamic was sufficient reason to avoid them. "Now that we are a little bit free," one woman explained, "I will not be a servant of human beings. I am only a servant of God".

Afghaniyat *and Other Markers*

Women and men who selected Afghan as their primary identification expressed pride in being Afghan and a strong sense of *Afghaniyat*. Both men and women in this category generally felt that an Afghan identity is what will bring cohesion to a fragmented society. They expressed a desire to re-invigorate the concept of Afghan and, as one older woman

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[144] The need to defend Islam is a reoccurring theme in Afghan literature and expressions. One such proverb referring to defending Islam is: "O foreigner, do not attack – attacking is our job!". Shah, S. (2003). The Storyteller's Daughter. London Penguin.

[145] Allusions to the 'other' culture that has altered Islam generally refer to the Wahhabi version of Islam, originating in Saudi Arabia.

[146] Four focus group sessions were held: three with women and one with men. Chapter VII has more details on the outcome of the sessions.

put it, to "try to be as one people". An illiterate woman of rural origins put it this way: "We are all Afghans first. The rest just divides us". This is a sentiment shared by many in this category. Another older woman said "being Afghan is what holds us together. It should be our strength".

Of those who selected Afghan, many connected their Afghan identity with their ability to drive non-Afghans away. An older man stated that the "importance of being Afghan is because Afghans never want to convert their Afghan identity". Another man reinforced this point by saying: "We don't want to lose our identity and sell ourselves". Many of the men in this category expressed a belief in the strength of Afghans as a force to act in unity against non-Afghans. A teenage male of rural origins said:

> *Afghan also means national unity, brotherhood, balance. The first factor to fulfill all the mentioned aims is to be an Afghan. And our national interests are in being an Afghan. It is our responsibility to protect it.*

A few of the women who selected Afghan also connected their role as women to their role as keepers of men's honor – and therefore national honor. One 23-year old married woman with two years of education explained that being Afghan means that "the women shall be kept at home and no one shall see her. Her role is to do the work of the home and to act as men wish". Another woman from the countryside put it this way: "I put women last because men are the highest degree and women are the lowest. It is more important that we are all Afghans". One woman ranked her Afghan identity lowest, explaining that "Afghan is last because Afghanistan has done nothing good for women". She ranked ethnicity as her primary form of identification.

Of the few interviewees that selected sex, they recognized that the distinction has become important in Afghanistan's aftermath. One married woman in her early 30s put it this way: "This has become the most important thing in our new time of peace". This perspective was reinforced by another woman who said: "being a woman is now important in Afghanistan, before it was not". A woman from Kabul explained that if she were a man, she would have picked sex as the most important identity marker - but she is not a man. Only one woman – and one man – expressed a more positive and hopeful sentiment. A 31-year old woman with no education said she "believe[s] in the strength of Afghan women". A man from rural Afghanistan with primary education held a liberal view, using words like "equality" and

"rights". He explained that "in recent years, relations between husband and wife - and all men and women – have turned very bad. To remake these relations is an important factor".

In Afghanistan's aftermath, very few respondents chose to identify with their ethnic group as this was a divisive issue during the conflict[147]. In fact, one older woman put it this way: "During the conflict, ethnicity became the most important thing for us". She explained that she still clings to these views and is not ready to look beyond ethnic lines. The other respondents – mostly women – guard these identity markers because, as one 21-year old woman explained, "this is how we understand each other, as tribes and groups". Ethnic identity also included tribal affiliation as these are interconnected in Afghanistan. Another woman from rural Afghanistan reinforced this view, stating that "we are closest to our tribe because this is where we find the most similarities". A 39-year old widow expressed her connection to ethnic identity in opposition to gender, stating that "I selected ethnicity because these are the things that identify us first, not gender roles and relations". I took interest in her use of the word gender as it was the only part of her response that was in English. This emphasizes a reoccurring theme in the text: that gender has become an imported buzzword for use by Afghans for non-Afghans, and a word for which no translation exists.

Many of those who identified with their ethnic group expressed a need to be in a familiar context with 'their own people'. In the context of conflict and displacement, many Afghans have found themselves removed from their families, communities, and tribes and are now without the social safety net that these networks provide. The expression *nufus-dar* was employed in this regard. This term literally means 'having people', having a sense of safety and belonging, for example within a tribe or clan (Shah 2003). Despite the importance of *nufus-dar*, family affiliation was not a popular answer for women. For the men who said they identified firstly with their role as a male member of a family, they explained it this way: "I am a member of a family first and have an obligation to protect them". Indeed, men who selected family as their primary affiliation likely did so because of their prominent socio-cultural role as head of the family and the sense of duty that this brings. Along with this duty

[147] To reinforce this point, Afghan literature also confirms that ethnic identity is less important than other categories as an identity marker. One can learn about the nature of *Afghaniyat* through stories. Every story "that is staged in Kabul is a window on a specific ethnographic location... Those scholars who have slumbered with the idea that ethnicity, especially [Pashtun] ethnicity, provided the framework for the production of hegemony and domination in Afghanistan, will find themselves sideswiped by Akram Osman's stories". Osman, A. and A. Loewen (2005). Real Men Keep Their Word: Tales from Kabul, Afghanistan: A Selection of Akram Osman's Dari Short Stories. Oxford, Oxford UP.

comes the obligation to protect the family honor as it is intimately linked with the man's own honor – and therefore his credibility in the community.

A young man from Kabul felt that family identity connected him to his ancestors, explaining the prominent role of older generations in forming the young. He put it this way:

> *Parents mean responsibility, developing knowledge, culture humanity, religion. They explain to us what other divisions and identities like ethnic groups, man/woman, and Afghan mean. But parents could also pass on poverty, ignorance, and darkness to their children.*

Identity Ranking – Women and Men

Identity Ranking – Women and Men	Percentage of Women of Total	Percentage of Men of Total	Percentage of Men and Women
Religion	28%	25%	53%
Afghan	19%	13%	20%
Ethnicity	17%	2%	13%
Sex	5%	5%	6%
Family	2%	13%	8%

It is significant that the majority of male and female respondents (53%) selected religion as their primary identity affiliation, while only 6% felt that they identified with their sex. It could be argued that aid interventions underestimated the importance of Islam on the lives of women and men in Afghanistan – and did not view it as a channel by which to make change. In fact, Muslim identity is more than a religious label. It also is an indicator of a person's reputation and a certification that s/he is credible and trustworthy. The expression *khub musselman ast*, literally meaning 'he's a good Muslim' is employed for this purpose (Azoy 2003).

It is also worthwhile noting that 17% of women and only 2% of men identified with their ethnic identity. Indeed, Rostami-Povey emphasizes that ethnic identities offer insights to understanding gender in Afghanistan (2007). Similar to gender identity, ethnic identity has been manipulated by leaders and foreign invaders and is both political subject and object. Gender and ethnic identities are subjects of political forces, but also political issues in their own right. Women might identify more strongly with ethnic identity because they have

periodically undergone the political processes of identification that accompany their own identities.

2. Sex and Gender

Generally, men felt more comfortable answering questions about women than the women were in answering questions about men. On both sides, however, many expressed a sense that they were not qualified to answer questions about the other sex. When asked questions about women, most men answered using 'we' – on behalf of all men. They felt qualified as individuals to express views that they believed were held by all men as a collective. The women, on the other hand, answered questions as individuals. Both men and women emphasized a division of public (male) and private (female) roles common to other patriarchal societies.

The male research assistant[148] who conducted interviews with the men noted the following:

> *There were men who welcomed me and answered eagerly, while some men tried to avoid the questions. Answering questions about gender didn't make them happy. They hear too much about this, and they are tired of it. To them, gender means woman. And 'woman' means more important than man to the internationals. I am an Afghan man so they told me openly about these things.*

The female research assistant explained it this way:

> *I had discussions with [the male research assistant] and learned many surprising things. During my interviews with women, impressions were different than with men. Most of the women were comfortable in answering questions and did not have trouble addressing issues. Some of them were happy to complain about men! A few of them didn't have answers to some of the questions because they had not thought of those things before. Generally, it was nice to compare ideas of a man and woman from a family. We learned that there are actually very few couples who are thinking the same.*

[148] For carrying out interviews in Dari and Pashto, I hired two research assistants – male and female.

The majority of the women interviewed initially had a difficult time answering questions about what it means to be a man in Afghanistan. They hesitated at first but were able to articulate quite clearly upon reflection. They compared being a man with being a "lord", possessing power, responsibility, and authority. Some of the women expressed a desire for greater equality and a dislike for men's disproportionate share of power, noting that "men have all the rights they want". One woman said that "men are better than women in all aspects, meaning they can do most of the things that women are not allowed to do". Another recognized that men "have a good position [and] will not give it up". A few women clearly articulated that inequality is not exclusive to Afghanistan. One married woman expressed it this way: "Not only in Afghanistan, but everywhere from the first day men have been more powerful, strong, and responsible". During the focus groups, women's opinions gradually became stronger, often fueled and encouraged by the other women. For example, a widow in her 40s with little education laughed and said: "A man has to be a caring father, a kind husband, and an active citizen. I do not know how many men fit this image". Men interviewed were far more animated in their responses about what it means to be a woman in Afghanistan. Men agreed that women are the responsibility of the male members of the household – husband, father, brother, and son – and that they must "obey the commands" issued to them by the men.

Nang: Women[149]

Most of the women - regardless of age, marital status, education level, and place of origin – felt that Afghan women do suffer under an Afghan patriarchy but are slowly exerting their rights. Many of these women felt that they have become conscious of their own suffering by viewing themselves through the eyes of the world and its general perception that Afghan women are "weak creatures", as one woman put it. One young unmarried woman explained that through the presence of the aid apparatus and their interventions to support Afghan women she has learned that "a woman is not very respected [in Afghanistan] as she is in other countries". One middle-aged married woman put it this way:

> *One category of women is the rural uneducated women, which are under oppression of the men. The view of the world regarding the women in Afghanistan is as slave of men and prisoner in the home. The meaning of women in Afghanistan has*

[149] *Nang* is defined as honor, particularly the honor that women represent through their behavior.

come to mean being deprived of all kinds of rights. As a result, Afghan women are synonymous with guilt and shame. The men are afraid and so do not let the women have an education or take part in the socio-economic spheres of the community because they think it is very bad work and it is very shameful for them to be in the public sphere and with the foreigners.

Many women felt that they wanted to be the ones governing the changes that were taking place in their lives. Many echoed the sentiment that they are once again objects of new decrees regarding women's roles. One middle-aged married woman from the countryside explained that "women in Afghanistan must give position to *themselves*, they have to struggle for their *own* rights in society". She emphasized the italicized words to indicate that Afghan women have the ability to make changes that are important to their lives. The interviewees recognized that they have agency and are able to act on their own behalf, despite the challenges they might face. Most of the women recognized that they carry the burden of the family, community, and national honor. They expressed that they are expected to be "obedient" and to be the "keeper of the family and the honor". A woman widow with rural origins explained that "women's behavior represents the family and the motherland. If she is good, people will think well of the family and the nation".

Most of the respondents recognized that they have been catapulted into the international limelight and that they were a relatively new and certainly short-lived focus of attention. Of those who noted this trend, they expressed discomfort in being the center of attention and the "object" of pity. A single woman in Kabul pointed out that "being a woman is now important in Afghanistan, before it was not". Another woman articulated that "woman in Afghanistan is a very popular object today". Her use of the word object was deliberate and emphasized. She expressed a sentiment echoed by many, namely that Afghan women are objectified in the eyes of foreigners, particularly the media. And that Afghan women are an object of the discourse animating the aid apparatus.

Namoos: Men[150]

Many women recognized that a change is taking place, and that men fear loss of power and control. A 30-year old woman from the south explained: "Men are unsure of their role

[150] *Namoos* is defined as pride, particularly that which Afghan men defend.

today. They want to bring back the old ways". Other women felt comfortable operating within traditional roles and felt that men should shoulder greater responsibility, as is their place. "Men are not only responsible for themselves, but they have the responsibility of their wives too," a 34-year old married woman explained. The theme of power and honor also came up repeatedly, with the notable difference being that women *represent* honor, but men *defend* it[151]. Many women preferred that men take on the public roles and felt that this in turn gave them more freedom and room to maneuver. A married woman in her early 20s articulated it this way: "Men have the full right and control over women in the family. It is their role to give their wives and daughters permission to do their tasks". She was not alone in her sentiments. Many preferred that the man represent the "public face of the family and the defender of the family".

Men generally felt very strongly about their role as provider and repeatedly defined themselves as such. Many men echoed the sentiment expressed by a 47-year old married man that "a man is responsible to work outside the house and feed his children". A 19-year old single man with nearly 12 years of education stated that "man means leader, power, principle. And his every order should be accepted by the woman". This presents a clear example of a sentiment that is shared across age, level of education, marital status, and other demographic indicators. A few men expressed fatigue with the responsibility of supporting the family, particularly in the context of the aftermath and the economic challenges it presents. One man put it this way: "Man means one who is wandering in search of food 24 hours a day".

3. *Mamus*: Roles and Relations[152]

Both male and female interviewees generally agreed that the period before the 1979 Soviet occupation was good for both men and women. Most interviewees expressed that men and women were satisfied with their position. Women felt that progress was being made toward equality. Men generally felt that there was equality, and that no one was concerned with place and position. A 44-year old married man added that "the eyes of people were shut - they had no idea about position of men and of women". Many men expressed that everyone was generally content – a period of "respect, friendship and love". One man

[151] The concept of honor will be elaborated in Chapter VII.
[152] *Mamus* is defined as men's duty to protect and respect women. In this sense it links *nang* (honor) and *namoos* (pride) and can be used to explain gender roles and relations in Afghanistan.

articulated that "both men and women had a good position before the war. They were able to come out of their houses and work safely and live to their potential". Another agreed, elaborating that "women could work with men shoulder to shoulder and they could take advantage of their new freedoms". A 24-year old married man with little education explained: "Men and women coordinated with each other and they were solving their problems easily and helping each other in every way". Some interviewees were more critical. One man put it this way: "Women didn't know much about their rights and were satisfied with what men expected from them". A few women noted that this period was more contentious and that "women were beginning to fight for rights, but men were resisting changes". A married Kabuli woman complained: "Women were trying to be equal. People say that there was equality, but I think it was not there and it could not have remained without much resistance".

The period of conflict was easier for male and female interviewees to define. There was general agreement that roles and relations suffered and were superseded by the conflict and ensuing violence. However, responses were split on two issues. Some believed that men and women suffered equally, while others – mostly women – believed that the various conflicts impacted women more than men. A young single man articulated that "positions were very bad because women and men were living in very deep sorrow because they were put in war unwillingly". One 53-year old man put it this way: "During that time there was no difference to be a man or woman - both of them were punished the same". An illiterate 19-year old woman agreed, saying that "things were very bad for women, and even for men". It was generally agreed that the period of conflict destroyed any progress that had been achieved in Afghanistan – particularly in gender relations. One man from rural Afghanistan explained it this way: "All people were unsheltered, displaced to different parts of the world, and their love changed to violence". Another man from Kabul reinforced this point, explaining that "during the war, relations between men and women were destroyed because of ignorance and poverty - and instead violence and tortures started".

A few respondents felt that women suffered more during the conflict. Women stated that "there was much cruelty on women", adding that war stopped all progress between men and women and "women's lives became a prison". Another woman held the view that "all groups took their anger out on women". A man in his 40s stated that "women suffered a lot more than men". Another man articulated that women's position deteriorated because "they were living in violence and struggling to survive, and men were oppressing women".

An unmarried man in Kabul explained that during the period of conflict "women didn't have any relations with men, and women were not able to go out and work because they were afraid". One man recognized that women had to take on additional responsibilities, stating that "all women were in search of shelter and protection since male responsibilities came to them because of war". Only one man expressed a preference for women's behavior during the conflict, because "women were more safe under the *bourka* - not like today".

Responses were mixed on the question of gender roles and relations in the aftermath. One woman complained: "Now we are in a situation that we were in before, fighting for rights and men not wanting to give them". Another said: "Only God knows how women will be". And yet another woman reinforced this point: "Today I am not sure which way things will go. Women are struggling for their rights, but that does not mean they will succeed". A 19-year old man with no education put it this way: "Conditions of the country have a big effect on gender relations. I do not think changing roles and relations is a good thing. In Afghanistan today, destruction is easy, but building is difficult". Only one woman – a 25-year old from Jalalabad – expressed a small sense of optimism amidst frustration: "Laws are now equal for men and women, but we have to realize these laws in our lives". One woman made an important parallel that was echoed in various conversations with interviewees and emerged as a response to a variety of questions:

> *Before the war men and women were under the government's control. During the war they were under the control of different regimes. Now again men and women are under control – this time it is the control of the international organizations*

This is a particularly worrisome sentiment as it compares the aid apparatus to an occupying force or a dictatorial regime that seeks to control the lives of Afghans. A few were quick to align the three "occupiers" – the Soviet Union, the Taliban, and the aid apparatus – in their similar quests to restructure gender roles and relations.

The Gender Order in Historical Perspective

When asked about gender roles and relations during different periods of history, some interviewees presented a fuller picture. Both women and men expressed the sentiment that things were "better" before the war. They recognized that conflict presents changed circumstances and therefore gender roles and relations change – generally to the detriment

of women. However, notable differences occur in their perceptions of gender roles and relations in the aftermath. Women generally believed that men sought to cling to power and were resisting change. A 17-year old illiterate woman told the story this way:

> *Women were free in the early days and men were learning to accept women as equals. During the war, both men and women fought for freedom, but war put men in charge again. And now we are told to believe that there is freedom, but men are still wanting to be in charge.*

Some men also expressed optimism and saw that change can be positive, although these were in the minority. The narratives of two men below illustrate the ambiguity within which they feel they are operating regarding gender roles and relations today, as compared to different periods in history:

> *(1) Before the war, everyone understood their role. Both men and women wanted – and sought - love between them. And they wanted those things which can create love. Before the war, very few women were in government. Although they were not in the public eye and did not have impact on men, they were content. They did not have violence. During the conflict, violence increased. Not just between men and women, but also homelessness, bad economy, other things. All of this caused corruption. Men and women lost their position. During the war, women had no impact. Violence against them increased. Men didn't have good relations with women. Everyone was lost in his work and grief. After the peace agreement, roles [of women and men] were expected to get better. Contact between men and women increased but we can't see dramatic changes in relations.*

> *(2) Before the war there was not any discussion of rights, but still women's position was getting better day by day. Their relations were good. Both were living with respect and love. Life was good. There was an understanding that men and women's position had to be different. During the war, men's position was good but women's was not, because war converted their ideas completely and their previous ideas were ruined. Their relations were not good because war again had its bad effects. Weak economy and displacement drove them to violence. Now we hope for a better future. We are looking forward to a day when – like before - man and woman will both have a significant place in the society within their traditional positions.*

The majority of men interviewed were not happy with changes and felt that women are stepping out of their prescribed role – and are encouraged by aid interventions to do so. As a result, many men felt that they were losing their 'place', as this 18-year old articulates:

> *Before the war, man and woman had their rights. They were in a very peaceful atmosphere. They had no problem together. They had a very good relationship. Violence level between men and women was very low. Men had respect for women - and so the women to men. During war time, women lost their rights, and their roles in the society. Violence increased incredibly. Previous respect collapsed. [Women] lost their dignity. After peace was built, democracy has given rights to the women which are not part of Islamic rules. And now sometimes violence is coming again.*

This sentiment is reinforced by a man from Kabul with nearly 12 years of education:

> *Before the war, man had his place in the society and woman had her place. During war time, relations between man and woman were demolished. No one was paying attention to their place. After the war finished, man and woman received their position and their rights. There must be a difference between man and woman. Woman has her place and man has his.*

Some men felt that the issue of power and rights is a zero-sum game, and that women cannot gain these things without men having to lose them. As a response to various questions, men expressed a sense of feeling lost, less important, and neglected because of women's newly granted power and rights. One man with 10 years of education put it this way: "First, there wasn't exactly such a thing as 'woman'. Then, both woman and man did not exist. There was war. Now there isn't such a thing as 'man'".

Changes

Most men feel that changes in relations between men and women are not a good thing. They prefer that each understands and respects their roles as Afghan culture and Islam have prescribed. Many of the men recognize that circumstances in Afghanistan have changed gender relations, and that fluctuations in women's roles have been largely a result of political processes. A 28-year old unmarried man explained:

Social customs of different regimes in different periods have negatively influenced the relationship between men and women. It will take time to ignore the ignorant customs that are imposed on society. And 'relationship' also means women in the house, not only outside.

Another man explained that relations change when situations change, and that these changes would be good "if men also got advantages". An elderly man with a few years of education reinforced this point, explaining that changes in gender relations are "not a good thing, because most of the people do not like these changes". Another man expressed that change can be a good thing – "only if it is not against what Afghans want". A man with 12 years of education expressed concern, explaining that in the past "men had an active role, and they were the ones who supported their family. Now that women have a better place in society, I am not sure what will happen to men's roles". One 19-year old man lamented:

Extremely bad changes are happening in relations [between men and women]. All of these things are bad - this urging of UN for women's rights all the time. We haven't seen a female president in USA so far, but here we saw female candidates in the recent election. And still people are putting pressure on Afghanistan to make more changes.

Some men expressed willingness to advance toward equality and a recognition that women's roles are changing and expanding. These men were not in the majority. For example, one middle-aged married man explained:

It is like a dramatic thing to say that rights of women and men are same. Everybody knows that this is not true. It is too early in Afghanistan to say that. Maybe it takes 20 or 30 years. People are learning now to practice democracy and things like that.

Women held a more cautious view. Some women, like this married woman with no education, felt that change must happen at a pace that works for both women and men. She explained that "it is a good thing that relations change, only if they change in a positive way for women. And the change must be slow or men will not be able to follow it". Most women agreed that change should happen slowly, should be led by Afghans, and should fit within the context of Islam. The following women shared this sentiment, amongst others:

- Relations are changing because the world is paying attention to Afghan women. But not all the changes are good. The good changes take a lot of time. In time, we can work with men as equals.
- Any changes that are too fast are bad. People will not accept them.
- If the men and women together decide on the changes, they will be good. If someone else from the outside makes the changes, no one will be happy with it.

A few women expressed the view that "relations are not changing the way [they] want" and that "relations change because rules and regulations of government change". This reinforces previously-stated sentiments about gender relations as the victim of various regimes and occupying forces.

One woman explained that gender relations have changed throughout Afghan history, but that this particular change is different because women are "protected objects". She shared her perspective:

> *I think that relations between men and women change because in different periods, the lifestyles of people were different. During the war, men had learned to be the cruel lords and force women to do whatever they liked because the government was supporting them to do so. But now men can't do anything because everyone supports women instead.*

Common Themes

A few common themes emerged repeatedly in conversations with both Afghan men and women. A few interviewees – all men - held the view that women are doing better in their quest for equality. One man explained: "Relations are good - or almost good. Women can work alongside men. Women can defend their rights, but they cannot take advantage of their liberty". He elaborated to say that some men might present obstacles in women's path. Others felt that full equality has been granted. One educated middle-age man explained that "now women's position is better. Women can work. Nothing is imposed by men. Everyone has his freedom". Another man from rural Afghanistan felt that things have improved for women since the conflict because "tyranny and violence have decreased and women's rights are given. Also, men don't come violently to women".

The more commonly held view by men was that women are prioritized over men and have received a disproportionate share of support, opportunities, and benefits – specifically from aid institutions. This perspective was shared by a wide variety of men, regardless of education, age, and marital status. Some of their responses were:

- Men's rights have gotten worse as women's get better. But I hope it will get better in the future.
- Men were not open minded to let their women work outside but since the Americans came and insisted on this, women are outside. Men only accept so they can solve their economic problems.
- Today women are more important than men. They can defend their rights against men.
- Now again women have their rights [as they did before the conflict] but this time men have lost their rights against women. And women are preferred over men.
- As a result of UN urgings, women want more rights than their own rights.
- The UN insists, and so women fight with their husbands for their rights. This is not correct.

Women in this category were cognizant of their partners' concerns. A 27-year old married woman with primary education felt that men were neglected and had just cause to be angry. She explained that "the position of women is better than men in the society today. Priority is given to women in every aspect of opportunities". Most of the women also recognized that they received a larger share of attention by the aid apparatus and were not comfortable with the imbalance. However, these women felt that men's concerns that women were seeking to usurp power and restructure traditional roles were not founded. Women expressed strong preferences to share resources and respect traditional boundaries, yet they also expressed frustration that this did not seem easily possible due to the current political project to liberate women. These sentiments represent the importance of people's perceptions – and their ability to undermine reality. Women across ages and education levels made the following statements:

- Some men think that women are being cared for by international organizations more than men. But the reality is that both men and women suffered.

- My brother-in-law believes that in the present government everyone pays more attention to women than men and so he encourages my husband to prevent me from coming to the literacy trainings.
- My husband doesn't have good behavior with me. He is angry because he didn't have a job, so he left me forever. The best times for men and women are long past.
- We have not seen any good thing for us from organizations. Yet men are feeling tricked into accepting women's authority.

Another emerging theme from interviews was the sentiment that promises for women have been made, but few have been delivered upon. This view – held by women of all ages and backgrounds – reflects their frustration with aid institutions for implementing programs that failed to bring drastic changes to fruition. Many women echoed the sentiment that the "changes are on paper, not in real lives". They expressed an understanding that the expectation they had - based on the rhetoric of aid institutions – should have been matched in practice. One young woman from rural Afghanistan shared the commonly held view that "there is a lot of attention to women on paper, but I am not sure if it is helping women in real life". Many women said that they felt an obligation to state that there is equality but felt that is was merely symbolic and that women's rights are on paper, "but what do [they] do with them?" as one woman asked. One older woman from Kabul said: "I am told that we are equal now, but I am not sure yet". It was also not unusual to hear that "promises have not been implemented", as one woman lamented. A widow in her 40s put it this way:

> *In general, women have been given rights and freedom. But in my mind, women expected more rights because that was what was promised to them. Most of the women are illiterate and they cannot analyze and understand what freedom is.*

One woman also echoed the sentiments of many when she explained that the aid apparatus supported and promoted a few of the Afghan women that are frequently in the public eye – the seemingly-liberated "success stories". She explained that the aid apparatus has "led one woman to a comfortable life and have led thousands of them to disaster".

Conclusions

Almost lost amid all this were the voices of Afghans... The whole world was talking about Afghanistan, but there was little evidence that it was listening to Afghans and their views on unfolding events.
(Clark 2004: 84)

The sentiments expressed in the preceding paragraphs cannot be divided along age, ethnic, or education lines. But there are patterns that can be discerned and that are worth noting. There is an overarching sentiment that men have been neglected in aid interventions. Both women and men share this view. There is a concern that violence is increasing – at home and in society. Finally, there is the sentiment that the influence of the aid apparatus is yet another variation on an occupying regime in Afghanistan, with its own ideas and impositions.

This in-depth view of Afghan identities illustrates the depth and complexities in understanding identities when designing aid interventions. A nuanced understanding should entail emphasis on the context that animates gender roles and relations, as relayed by Afghan women and men themselves. The prominent themes in this chapter are based on men's perceptions that they are neglected in aid interventions. Indeed, men believe that women are now better off than they were in the past, and better off than men are. Women agree that men have been neglected. However, they do not necessarily feel that they are any better off. In fact, women generally feel disappointment because promises made to them have not been delivered.

These themes and others will be elaborated in the chapters ahead. Chapter VII continues to reveal the data gathered from Afghan women and men to address key themes, organized around women and men's perceptions. These perspectives and experiences are then compared with focus group discussions to verify findings. Chapter VII also entails comparisons and implications at the family and community levels using women's life histories and profiles of couples. This chapter concludes by raising the possibility that violence against women could be an unintended effect.

I have hope, but I have no faith.
– Afghan woman on progress for women in Afghanistan

In a continuation from Chapter VI, the crux of this research is to bring to the fore and learn from the voices and perspectives of Afghan women and men. Beall articulates the importance of distinguishing between people and perspectives. This is relevant, as Afghan history aptly demonstrates, because the tenacious nature of perspectives can sway the people – particularly in regard to gender issues (1996: 4). The perspectives expressed in the sections below address the three strongest themes: the importance of honor, the denial of agency, and the dissatisfaction with aid – all linked to the neglect of men in aid interventions.

1. Honor

> *Throughout the 20th century, the debate on women's rights and their role in Afghan society has been closely interlinked with the national destiny. Women not only carry the burden of symbolizing the honor of the family, but often are seen as embodying the national honor and aspirations as well. Gender has thus been one of the most politicized issues in Afghanistan over the past 100 years, and attempts at reform have been denounced by opponents as un-Islamic and a challenge to the sanctity of the faith and family.* (World Bank 2004: 14).

The system of honor in Afghanistan plays such a prominent role that it merits special focus. Honor is the foundation of Afghan culture, "largely manifested in the behavior of one's 'women'" (Nassery 2004: 6). As addressed in previous chapters, Afghanistan is a traditional and patriarchal society, within which the protection of society rests on the protection of women, and the honor of society is therefore reflected in the honor of women (Skaine 2002: 24). Dupree offered wise advice to non-Afghans working in the country in 1996, yet it merits repetition 10 years later:

> *We must not underestimate the value attached to female purity. Every time a new group comes to power in Afghanistan, it has to present itself as the protector and arbiter of women's behaviour, and as being made up of good Muslims. This is*

something we have to understand – even if we believe that the results of what is often largely rhetoric are often extremely negative for women.
(1996: 12)

As a result, women's behavior is circumscribed and they are very conscious of this responsibility. However, in the context of social and economic upheaval in the aftermath, women are obligated to meet the family's basic needs and are therefore compelled to transcend prescribed gender roles and social systems. When there is an opportunity for assistance, most women prefer to be aided within the context of the family. Regardless, most aid interventions overlooked this, actually provoking a retreat to more conservative measures. Women's status as keepers of family honor and identity became increasingly magnified – and *purdah* more strictly enforced – when men were "deprived of their 'normal' means of demonstrating identity and social status: economic and social autonomy" (Boesen 1990: 172). The aid apparatus tended to view the reinforcement of *purdah* as a manifestation of Islamic intolerance. It more likely signified an attempt to preserve the family – and its dignity - in the context of rapid change beyond men's control (Centlivres-Demont 1994: 358).

Thus, many Afghan men – and women - view women's employment as a reflection and reminder of their absolute poverty and destitution, an insult to men's dignity, and a questioning of men's ability to provide. An Afghan saying expresses this well: "While the rich can afford honor, the poor must 'eat shame'" (World Bank 2005: 80). Thus, the idea of honor is deeply embedded in Afghanistan. Azoy explains this system well:

The primary scarce resources remain land, water, livestock, and – in a very real, but obviously different, sense – women. All four are vital, easily lost, and endlessly troublesome... It is women, however, who are widely considered the most volatile cause for serious dispute. Without control over female reproductive services, a man can have no sons (to assist in economic activity, to act as the core of political support, and to provide security in old age) and no daughters (to be married outside the nuclear family and thus to provide both bridewealth and affinal alliance). With their sexuality generally considered unmanageable, women are secluded as much as possible from all but the narrowest circle of family males. Here they serve as the primal embodiments of masculine honor. A man may suffer the loss of material property and still keep the core of his self-respect intact. Mere suspicion, on the other

hand, of illicit access to his women requires an overt response: immediate and extreme. In a purely economic sense, therefore, control over these scarce resources – land, water, livestock, and (somewhat more mystically) women – constitutes the main source of political authority.
(2003: 30)

Thus, many women noted that men's honor was compromised in their inability to provide for the family. As a result, women viewed them as emasculated. Women frequently referred to the "special bravery of Afghan men", along with their strength and dignity. One married woman of rural origins expressed the concern of many when she said: "We don't want [our Afghan men] to stretch the hand of need to anyone in the world". She went on to explain that new 'occupying force' - namely the aid apparatus - has crippled Afghan men's ability to stand on their own.

Defending the Pashtunwali

To confirm findings, a focus group was held comprised of Pashtun women from different parts of Afghanistan – Kabul, other cities, and rural areas[153]. The rationale behind isolating Pashtun women was to provide a context whereby the traditionally 'conservative' ethnic group could share concerns they felt to be exclusive to their community. This was also done to determine if Pashtun women – as a group – expressed different ideas from those of the other ethnic groups. Ethnicity was not used as a category of analysis in the interviews.

Pashtun women are traditionally bound by the *Pashtunwali,* the unwritten legal code of their population. In this code, women play a symbolic role as the core of the society and therefore must be protected. The honor of the Pashtuns is therefore intimately linked with – and often entirely dependent on – women's honor. This results in circumscribed movements for women and limited – if any – contact with men. This restriction, known as *purdah*, sets clearly defined rules for women's interactions outside the domestic sphere (Marsden 1998: 92)[154]. The penalty of transgression of this unwritten code is worse than death: it is dishonor (2003: 118). And death is the only viable alternative to loss of honor. Afghanistan's other ethnic groups have, at varying times throughout history, adopted measures that stem from the *Pashtunwali* (Dupree 1990: 123). Inaccurate and facile analyses have been made

[153] See the Methodology (Appendix I) for a breakdown of focus groups.
[154] *Purdah* refers to the Islamic practice of seclusion of women.

connecting women's oppression to Islamic practices. However, contrary to common understandings of the role of women in Muslim contexts, norms governing women in Afghanistan are based more closely on tribal codes such as the *Pashtunwali*.

The women in this group did express what might be labeled as more 'conservative' ideas and spent the bulk of the hour discussing the importance of religion and the concepts of *akl* and *namoos*, elaborated below[155]. *Akl* can be translated as 'responsibility' in Dari, but has much deeper meanings. It refers to a code of accepted behavior, and suggests "agency, competence, the ability to predict and make rational, sensible decisions, but it also connotes a willingness to accept the consequences of action, self-control and discipline" (Tapper 1991: 209). *Akl* reflects a combination of honor and shame with a notion of responsibility that together represents men's control of resources and includes men's control over women[156]. Women refer to *akl* in discussions of men's honor, and their responsibility in safeguarding it. *Akl* reflects their understanding of their role and the risks that betraying it may entail.

Namoos refers to the chastity of women, and implies the duty of men to protect and respect women. The term also refers to men's pride in safeguarding women's chastity. The women explained that they run risks of losing their 'chastitiy', or the *perception* that they have lost their chastity, with greater public exposure and assuming traditionally-male roles. In Afghanistan, the worst insult for an Afghan man is to call his women *bi-namoos*, without chastity. This distinction reflects the Afghan tradition of strong divisions between the public and private sphere. *Namoos* can also be defined as shame. The term is used by men to exert control over women, by women to instill fear in other women, and by women to rationalize their role. The women in this focus group used these terms to explain the risks they take in participating in the aid interventions and the desire they have to not step over these Afghan lines.

In a discussion of women's place, the women expressed strong desires to remain largely within traditional roles. The context of Islam and its view of gender roles was a frequent reference point. Women in this group generally viewed their roles as first within the household with their children. Tapper's study of gender roles in the context of marriage in Afghanistan

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[155] Although this finding might conform to the stereotype of the 'conservative Pashtun', I note that the label 'conservative' is fluid – and relative – based on the current socio-political project in operation.

[156] For more information, see Tapper, N. (1991). Bartered Brides: Politics, Gender and Marriage in an Afghan Tribal Society. Cambridge, Cambridge UP.

reinforces this concept. She explains that "honorable women" passively accept their role as one of dependence on men, not as individuals but as part of a collective household structure (1991: 213). Family is indeed a prominent institution in Afghanistan, and motherhood the preferred role for Afghan women. Since Afghan women see themselves in the context of the family and society, it should be Afghan society as a whole – not isolated segments – that need to debate human rights in their contexts (Skaine 2002: 142).

These women also felt very strongly about men's role as provider for the family. They explained the connection between this traditionally male responsibility and men's honor. In short, a man with honor is one who is able to provide for his family. Conversely, a man without work is one who has no honor. Women explained that the control of resources in the language of honor and shame. A man's honor depends on his ability to mange and defend human and material resources (Tapper 1991: xvii). A woman who has assumed these traditionally-male responsibilities becomes 'like a man' or literally, *nar shedza*, a 'man-woman'[157]. Shah's story aptly explains that, to Afghans, "there are more important things than family or possessions, even than life" (2003: 29). She is talking about honor[158]. Women repeatedly emphasized the importance of the dignity of Afghan men. One woman put it this way: "We don't want men to be unemployed and without dignity. Their dignity will also bring us more freedom".

This finding is reinforced by Nancy Hatch Dupree's study of the family as a social institution in different periods in Afghan history. She explained that when donors showed a distinct preference for women's employment, many men felt diminished and felt that their patriarchal status had eroded (2004: 319). They now depended on women for their survival. Women, in turn, assumed the role of primary breadwinner, "adding further to male sensitivities about their patriarchal prerogatives... These role reversals required adjustments in relationships that were often the cause of considerable tension" (2004: 319). The women in the focus group preferred that the men have the responsibility of working and providing for the household and controlling the domestic resources. Women were conscious of the fact that they could bring shame on the family by assuming these roles. Women also recognize their role in defending and safeguarding male honor, as the "keeper of the family and the honor", as one woman explained. They understand that their actions could undermine male

[157] This concept also appeared in Tapper's study. For more information, see Ibid.
[158] Shah aptly explains the importance of honor to Afghan culture. She further elaborates on the importance of the *appearance* of honor, even if it is only a façade. There is no substitute for the dishonor that results from losing your 'public face', she explains. Shah, S. (2003). The Storyteller's Daughter. London Penguin.

honor and result in serious repercussions. Paradoxically, women find much greater freedom to maneuver when they remain within the confines of these traditional roles. In fact, the women explained that they run the risk of being further restricted if they try to assume overly public lives. An AREU study confirms that such behavior "can bring about negative perceptions of a family, [and therefore] men may be even more reluctant to allow women's participation [in development programs]" (Wakefield and Bauer 2005: 7-8). Dupree's study also reinforces these findings, explaining that Afghan men believed that work outside the home stripped women of their dignity. As a result, this was seen as a blot on the reputation of men who permitted this behavior (2004).

Ghayrat: *Protection of Honor*[159]

Afghan literature – in particular the short stories of Akram Osman and the *Landays* of Pashtun women[160] - offer insight to these contradictions and present a creative interpretation of ground-level cultural and social realities (Osman and Loewen 2005: xiii). Saira Shah, author of *The Storyteller's Daughter* and producer of the documentary *Behind the Veil*, expressed the importance of stories as a special window to understanding Afghanistan:

> *Experiences follow patterns, which repeat themselves again and again. In our tradition, stories can help you recognize the shape of an experience, to make sense of and to deal with it... What you may take for mere snippets of myth and legend encapsulate what you need to know to guide you on your way anywhere among Afghans.*
> (2003: 8)

In an explanation of Akram Osman's main story *Real Men Keep Their Word*, Arley Loewen explains the meaning behind the term *marda ra qawl*. Loewen explains that this idiomatic expression literally means 'men keep their word', "but on a deeper level it refers to 'men of honour' who will stand by their word at all costs... the highest virtue in traditional Afghan culture" (2005: xxxi). Myriad Afghan expressions exist to depict the state of a man without work, and by extension without honor. In the story *From the Root of a Shrub*, a character

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[159] *Ghayrat* is defined as the "right to defend one's property and honor by force". Ibid.
[160] For more information, see Osman, A. and A. Loewen (2005). Real Men Keep Their Word: Tales from Kabul, Afghanistan: A Selection of Akram Osman's Dari Short Stories. Oxford, Oxford UP. Majrouh, S. B. (1994). Songs of Love and War: Afghan Women's Poetry. New York, Other Press.

explains that "a man without a job either fools around or becomes sick," (2005: 101) emphasizing need for man to have work as way to define himself.

Lack of honor can also be manifested in two significant forms: dependence on external aid and 'Westernization'. In *The Deceptive Object*, 1971, 'one who eats bread without shame' "refers to someone who can work but does not work, and eats and lives off others" (2005: 173). This sentiment has been expressed by men who feel a growing dependency on international aid, coupled with an inability to achieve self-sufficiency due to lack of opportunity. In *The Brains of the Family*, the protagonist laments because "the atmosphere in [his] home became so Westernized that he felt [he] lost his honour, his dark, heavy dignified moustache seemed soiled" (2005: 140). Political leaders such as Muhammad Daud Khan linked honor Afghan sovereignty. Daud is well known for his political poem using the eagle as a "symbol of freedom and indifference towards the dictates and politics of either the West or East" (Osman and Loewen 2005: 204). The poem urged Afghans to be "free like eagles", to retain their dignity, and to cease their pleas for assistance from foreign powers[161]. This is significant in that many stories during the period of Soviet occupation (1979-1989) depicted the discourses of the day – replete with contradictions based on the tensions between Afghan and Western ideas (Osman and Loewen 2005: xiii).

The *Landay*, or short poem, also offers insight to the prominence of honor in Afghan culture. The term *Landay* - literally meaning "the short one" in Pashto - is a brief poem of two verse lines of nine and thirteen syllables respectively. *Landays* "frequently punctuate conversations where it is used as a quote or a saying, lending support to a feeling or idea" (Majrouh 1994: xi) and, in so doing, provide special insight into Afghan society in turmoil (Dupree 1990: 128). *Landays* can also be viewed as an act of resistance "because [the Pashtun woman's] melodies tirelessly glorify three themes that taste of blood... love, honor, and death" (Majrouh 1994: xvi). Of these three, emphasis rests on the honor code, and by extension the importance of adhering to traditional gender roles, particularly the role of men as protectors of the family and defenders of honor. These *landays* use battle as a metaphor to represent honor lost or gained in this realm:

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[161] Afghan literature, particularly the short stories of Akram Osman, can be used as social comment. Following Muhammad Daud Khan, Osman employed the symbol of the eagle as a metaphor to criticize foreign influence in Afghanistan. An excerpt from his story entitled "The Blind Eagle" expresses this sentiment: "Here, immersed in a realm free from the dictates of the East and the West, the eagle lost himself in a burning desire of unknown love" (201). Osman, A. and A. Loewen (2005). Real Men Keep Their Word: Tales from Kabul, Afghanistan: A Selection of Akram Osman's Dari Short Stories. Oxford, Oxford UP.

May you be found cut to pieces by a trenchant sword,
But may news of your dishonor never reach my ears!
(Majrouh 1994)

May you be blackened by gunpowder and dyed in blood;
But may you not return from the battlefield and in disgrace.
(Dupree 1990)

It is well that you are wounded in battle, my love!
Now I shall walk proudly.
(Dupree 1990)

2. Agency

Women were extremely vocal and articulate in discussions of agency. Most of these women felt that the world sees them as 'weak'. A few examples of this include:

- The world did not think well of Afghan women, that is why they wanted to help and save them. But Afghan women are stronger than outsiders know.
- They think Afghan women are weak. This image influenced work on women in Afghanistan.
- Afghan women are oppressed and weak! This is not accurate, but the world wants to see us this way.
- I don't think the image was good. They thought we could not struggle for our rights without their help. We are happy for help, but we want to direct the changes.
- The world thought Afghan women were prisoners. In a way this was true, but we are able to survive as we have over the years. We are not only victims.

In this context, the *chaddari* came up repeatedly as the Western symbol for their perceived weakness of Afghan women, and the source of Western pity. One woman explained that the world views Afghan women "just like animals in *bourkas*. Another said: "Foreigners always want to ask about *bourka*. It is the most important thing for them. Afghan women do not see the *bourka*. Foreigners only see *bourka*".

Afghan women articulated strongly that they want to be the ones to decide on the images. "One day we will have the power to change this image and people will listen!" one woman stated. These women felt strongly that the pervasive images were "through the eyes of other countries" and had little to do with Afghan priorities. "Their images are their own and we do not interfere," one woman explained. "But as we see it, they are far away from the truth". This image, many women explained, should be one that reflects who Afghan women are, what they want, and "how [they] would like to see [their] society". "We don't want our men to be owned by anyone," one woman stated. Many women expressed that they feel solidarity with their Afghan brothers and would prefer that women not be viewed as "in need of saving from Afghan men". Most women felt that they were artificially juxtaposed against men. Facile analyses of women as unhappy victims and men as tyrants and terrorists were hard to combat.

On the part of the men, of the 31 who felt that their agency had been denied in the aid process, 71% were of rural origins. Here the data differs slightly. For the other categories, married men appeared to be the most discontent. Regarding agency, men – and women – who were unmarried expressed the greatest concern (55% and 44%, respectively). Rural women comprised the majority (67%). Most of the women in this category had no education (62%), while the majority of men (71%) were in the highest category of education. The distinction between rural and urban perspectives is likely a result of the displacement felt by those of rural origins. This group lacks the social safety net of community and kin that rural lives provide. Without such ties, the rural population's sense of disillusionment could be greater.

Afghan men articulated that they wanted to feel 'as men' and they were actively denied this. Many cited a lack of respect and the perception that they were "under the authority of others". They also expressed a sense that interventions did not recognize men's and women's 'place' and that they were imposing an alien world-view on Afghanistan. "We want a free Afghanistan without the intervention of foreigners," one man explained. He was not alone in his opinion. Many Afghan men in this category felt strongly that they should be the ones to decide the direction of the new Afghanistan, and that the aid apparatus should adhere to their views. These men did not think well of aid institutions, explaining that "it is all because of these organizations that men are losing their rights".

These men expressed exasperation with the images they felt the world had of them. One man explained: "I think world image is that Afghan women are looked down upon. Oppressed and helpless. And men are tyrants, ignorant and bad persons". Another elaborated:

> *World image is absolutely wrong and is not truth... They think that Afghan woman lives as a slave in the society. They think Afghan man doesn't value Afghan woman, that man doesn't know her as a human. World image about Afghan man is also not correct. They know Afghan man as a tyrant, extremist, and supporter of terrorism and war but they support woman, peace and construction.*

Men were not opposed to changes, "as long as they are not against what Afghans want". And yet, no one had asked them what they want. They asked to be respected "as Afghans" – meaning within the context of their culture and religion. One man said: "Both 'gender' – man and woman – should have their own life". I noted the use of 'gender' in this sense, particularly as it was used in English. Another man put it this way: "For Afghanistan I wish peace, safety, Islam, Afghan-ness, freedom. A complete free country which shouldn't be occupied by others".

There is a notable difference in the data between the demographics of men and women regarding issues of agency. Men with generally higher levels of education felt that they had been misrepresented and denied agency in aid interventions, while the bulk of women who shared this view were those with no education. The same trend is true for dissatisfaction with aid interventions. Men who noted their dissatisfaction with aid interventions come from a largely better-educated group, while women who shared their sentiments generally had no education at all. There presents an interesting trend. It appears that men with higher levels of education are better able – or more willing - to articulate their dissatisfaction with the issues above than those with less education. The opposite is true for women. There appears to be an inverse relationship between women's levels of education and their levels of concern with the themes of aid and agency - and also with perceptions of violence. Women with no education are still able to articulate their needs and concerns, and demonstrate their own agency and a level of consciousness that one would not normally associate with uneducated women. These women also expressed concerns that they had been singled out for support because of the pervasive view from the aid apparatus 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. It did not require any education at all for women to sense this.

One finding in the category of dissatisfaction with aid deserves particular attention. Of the 121 people interviewed, 104 (44 men and 60 women) clearly stated that their problems stemmed from the neglect of men in aid interventions. This is 86% of all of those interviewed – a significant majority. Based on the data, the significance of this 'oversight' cannot be overstated.

Strength and Resilience

A focus group consisting of women of rural origins of varying ethnicities also expressed issues of agency. They all came to Kabul in order to benefit from aid activities and economic opportunities. The women explained that their perceptions of such opportunities in Kabul did not at all match their present realities. They felt disillusioned and not entirely confident that they will be able to become self-sufficient. Nonetheless, these women preferred to remain in Kabul as their village homes had nothing to offer them anymore. The women in this group shared stories and anecdotes to illustrate their conditions. They turned to me very early in the session and one of them asked me why other countries had abandoned Afghanistan "like they did before"[162].

One woman eloquently expressed sentiments that were echoed by other participants: "I think other countries pity us, pity Afghan women. You should tell them that if there had been peace in Afghanistan, our country and people would be just as educated and successful as any other". This was followed by another woman who said: "Tell the world that Afghan women are very strong and they will do anything for the future of their country and their children".

Despite their displays of strength, the women of this focus group then went on to share stories with each other of difficulties at home. They explained that their domestic lives had become increasingly strained in the last months, contrary to what they would have expected. The women in this group all have husbands or male family members who are not entirely

[162] History documents the Afghan legacy of abandonment following the end of Soviet occupation. The country fell into civil war and plunged into international anonymity. All this changed with the Taliban and 11 September 2001.

supporters of their participation but feel that they have no choice but to send their women out to support the family.

One woman told of the negotiations she regularly undertook with her husband in order to have permission to attend trainings. She explained that, at first, he gave his permission because there was no other source of income for the family. But in recent months, his increased frustration and feelings of uselessness had taken a toll on her. She thus had made arrangements to split the little financial assistance she received from the institution with her husband in order to buy his compliance[163]. She feared that this would not be sufficient for long as he has already started asking for more than half of the money, which would not leave enough to ensure the survival of the family.

Another woman in the group – a widow - shared her story. She explained that her 11-year old son forbade her to leave the house, saying it would shame him if she were to be seen "wandering in the streets". She argued with him, explaining that there was no alternative and in order to support the family and provide food, she must take advantage of the only opportunity available to her. His response was: "If you want to leave the house, you'll have to kill me first". She respected his wishes and delayed her participation in the NGO program until her son was enrolled in school. Even then, many months into her participation, he did not think she left the house during the day.

3. Aid

Afghan women and men frequently stated that they were not pleased with the progress made to date by aid institutions and many felt that the money could have been better spent, and with farther-reaching effects. Beall and Esser's study reinforces this resentment felt by Afghans in general toward aid interventions. For example, one respondent said: "We are really angry at all these foreign NGOs... they conduct lots of surveys but nothing happens. There are more NGOs than people in Afghanistan. They should either work harder or ... go... home" (2005: 27). Indeed, many of those interviewed shared this sentiment.

[163] As one example, women participants in Women for Women International's program received $15 every month for a period of one year in order to meet their basic needs. In receiving the financial assistance, women also agree to participate in vocational skills training, rights awareness programs, and other opportunities as needed such as literacy, basic health education, microfinance, etc.

In Afghanistan motivation has been crippled by the expectation that aid interventions would provide for the people. It is important to view the dissatisfaction with interventions in the current context of overall hostility towards aid institutions. This frustration had been brewing in Afghanistan starting in late 2002 when Afghans began to articulate dissatisfaction with the army of 'international' aid institutions – and their 'international' standards of living – that were failing to make visible and sustainable changes in Afghanistan. This anger moved from the streets to the Afghan cabinet with the appointment of Dr. Ramazan Bashardost as Minister of Planning in 2004. Bashardost coined the now oft-cited term *NGO-ism* to describe the failure of the aid apparatus to assist Afghanistan, opting instead to foster corruption and increase their own wealth. Bashardost further accused NGOs of "economic terrorism" and blamed them for the misuse of the country's scant development funding (Stapleton 2006: 6). This message played well to the Afghan public, particularly in Kabul, and would be replayed during the riots in the summer of 2006[164].

Similar to Bashardost's view, many men felt that aid interventions had misused and withheld funds from Afghanistan. One older man put it this way: "We want those donations which the world is giving to Afghanistan today to be given to the people that are entitled to it, not to their agents". By agents, he was referring to aid institutions. "They only saw one layer of society," one man explained. It was therefore not a surprise that promised changes would not reach the people who needed them most. Indeed, the theme of empty promises was oft-repeated. One man expressed it this way: "They haven't done very good things yet, just promises of complete freedom. They prepared the opportunities for working. And now we wait. The rights which have to be given unfortunately haven't been given". Another added that aid institutions have "done their work hypocritically". Another stated that the Afghan government "should be based on its people, not on international organizations".

Many men also expressed their dissatisfaction with aid institutions through the lens of women. The general sentiment was that these institutions failed to understand what constitutes Afghan culture when it came to women. As a result, institutions abused women "by disrespecting their role and religion". Another man stated: "They haven't done anything necessary for women so far. They analyzed women's rights incorrectly. They have no respect for Afghan men and women". This discussion raised sensitivities, especially when the men blamed the aid apparatus for "unveiling our women" and for leading people away from

[164] Chapter IX will provide further details on these events.

Islam. One man put it this way: "As UN urges, women fight with their husbands for their rights. This is not correct." It was not unusual for men to feel angered and emotional during this segment of the interview. Their frustration was apparent, particularly in the following line: "All women's activities... just they talk about democracy and women's rights without any clear vision for changing". Another elaborated: "In the area of importing or bringing foreign culture and tradition, international organizations have bad effect on Afghan women".

Women also believed that their participation in aid interventions "has created problems for women". These institutions, they explained, "tried to change the way men think", and they have failed. One woman explained that the agenda to "make men and women's rights equal" is not possible and is far too provocative for Afghanistan. And these institutions apparently contradicted themselves when they offered opportunities only for women. Many women explained that women are the only ones who are given opportunities for work and trainings, and therefore the survival of the family becomes their responsibility. One young woman from Kabul elaborated: "[These] acts have just increased the gap between men and women".

Many felt that aid progress was limited, and that promises have not been met. "They haven't done that much anyway," one elderly woman stated. "To make real progress will take much more time". The little that has been done "is only in a very symbolic way". One woman explained that if she measures against promises made, "the future is in ruin". Another elaborated that "women have opportunities presented like treats, but they cannot access them". One old woman of rural origins lamented: "I am told that we are equal now, but I am not sure yet". This sentiment was reinforced by another woman who asked: "Now women have rights on paper, but what do they do with them?" Other women expressed it this way:

- The organizations are established to help women, but then they work for their own promotion.
- There is a lot of attention to women on paper, but I am not sure if it is helping women in real life.
- Promises haven't been implemented. They trick both men and women of Afghanistan into believing that the world will come save them and change everything.
- What have they done yet for Afghan men and women? What good things could the future hold?

- We all fought for freedom, and now we are told to believe that there is freedom.

Many women also felt that their situation was an old issue and "the world does not want to know of Afghan women now". Another woman elaborated: "I do not think the world cares about Afghanistan anymore. They are tired of saving them and now look elsewhere". These women generally agreed that the aid apparatus entered Afghanistan with much fanfare, re-arranged things, and subsequently made a swift exit. Many women felt that the hidden agenda of interventions was "to change what is Afghan culture" and to focus on "rights that are not in Islam". These women argued that their rights are in fact safeguarded in Islam and that they are not for aid institutions to give.

On Afghan Terms

A focus group reinforced dissatisfaction with aid, emphasizing the need to operate on Afghan terms. This group brought together the other ethnic groups – Hazara, Tajik, Uzbek, Nuristani, and so on – as these are generally considered less conservative and have, at times, been more closely aligned with each other than with the Pashtun community[165]. This group was comprised of women who were originally from Kabul and other urban areas. Two of the women present were from Jalalabad, and three were Kabuli in origin.

The conversation in this group focused on pushing for progress, and the consequences of doing so. The women used examples from Afghan history to illustrate their sentiments and to demonstrate the Afghan population's reaction to strong pushes for social change. Below is a sample of the conversation and select quotes from the women in their discussion.

> *A: In the Soviet time when they started to establish literacy classes for women in the villages, everyone reacted very strongly. Village leaders warned everyone not to have it, period.*
>
> *B: I always insist on the fact that we cannot copy any other modernity to our country. We need to translate international ways into our own language, into our own context, and into our own culture.*

[165] This is particularly relevant in the battle between the Northern Alliance (various ethnic groups) and the Taliban (largely Pashtun).

The women also raised the subject of the word gender and its meaning. These women were not able to offer a concrete meaning of the word but did quickly share its strong associations with a foreign agenda. The women could not define gender, but they were cognizant that it was the right word to use in the presence of foreigners to signify progress.

The discussion continued:

> *C: People do not know what is this gender. My father is an educated man, but he sometimes asks me "what is this gender, gender, gender always you are talking about?" Even in educated families this is a new word. And in my family, we do not know what it means. Only that we hear it very much.*
>
> *D: I think it's not only a new word in Afghanistan, but in many other countries...*
>
> *E: But we are copying a model from outside. Copying is not the solution, I think.*
>
> *C: Men are saying that gender means taking the power from the men and giving it to the women.*
>
> *A: My husband is angry with all of these trainings. He says: "Only training for you and nothing for me. And gender means I sit at home and you go out and do everything. And what are these international agencies doing? And it's a Western idea, and it's bad, and it doesn't respect our culture, and it's not Muslim".*
>
> *B: [International agencies] say that they cannot find any Afghan expert that knows about gender, so they have no choice but to bring someone from a different culture. What we should do is find those people who know Afghan culture, not another culture, and train them in gender: What does gender mean? What does gender want from the people? What is our responsibility to gender?*

Indeed, researchers have noted that Afghans are currently feeling culturally displaced and are forced to renegotiate identities and gender roles. This sense of despair is in reality a frustration that while Afghans continue to struggle for physical survival, they risk being overridden by an aid apparatus that imposes hasty solutions before giving Afghans time to consider their role in the process (UNDP and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2004: 218).

4. Engagement with Men

Interviews conducted with Afghan women and men revealed a discontentment with the operations of aid institutions, and a sense that the social order had been disrupted in ways that have negative effects for women. Men recognize that they are not necessarily a focus of attention, and that the economic survival of the family now depends on the woman as she is offered greater opportunities. Women have noted that men are increasingly becoming angry and impatient as they continue to be denied the traditional role of provider in the family. A 20-year old woman explained that "organizations provide opportunities only for women... so the women have to step out of the house in order for the family to survive". A woman in her late 20s elaborated: "Women are allowed to work. Actually, there are *opportunities* for work. Allowing women to work is up to the husband. But if he cannot find work, he has no choice but to let his wife work".

Many women interviewed felt that the burden of supporting the family was placed on them and that many of them did not want it. These women expressed their preference for the male members of the family to work. Women explained that they took advantage of existing opportunities because there were no opportunities for men to earn a living, as stated above. These findings were further confirmed by a report published in April 2006 on urban livelihoods in Kabul. A portion of the report profiled households where women were the main income earners, stating that these women did not necessarily feel "empowered" by this responsibility nor were they happy with the "freedom" from their new role "since it may have been foisted upon them by circumstances versus through choice" (Schutte 2006: 49). The author then explained:

> *Husbands who are not able to fulfill their ascribed role as breadwinners have to face complaints from their spouses, which in turn may lead to frustration and incidences of domestic violence directed against women and children.*
> (Schutte 2006: 50).

Dar be Dar: Are Men Included?

Almost all the men noted that women were prioritized in aid interventions. They generally agreed that aid institutions "did nothing" for them. While they complained to their wives, they were concerned about making more public complaints because their wives were

bringing home money – which many of them were receiving. However, men expressed that they were offered very little in terms of services and support, therefore they had no choice but to rely on their women to access training and economic opportunities and to share them with the rest of the family. This denied them their traditional role as provider and insulted their honor, many stated. One man described his situation as *Dar be Dar*, meaning being "door to door". This Afghan expression describes that of a man "in a state of desperation because all doors of opportunity are closed before him" (Osman and Loewen 2005: 85). This sentiment characterizes the sense of desperation felt by many men, and the pervasive view that their honor has been insulted by reducing them to beggars. For many men, the insult to their honor came when their wives were able to find work and support the family and they were not. Frances Cleaver's studies on masculinities reinforce the belief that in many countries, 'being a man' involves providing for the family. "When economic changes... occur which make this difficult, men's fundamental identity is called into question... sometimes resulting in dysfunctional and anti-social behavior" (2002: 3-4)[166].

Men expressed concerns that aid institutions were encouraging women to speak out against their husbands and deliberately disrupting the household hierarchy. They also noted that women were promised dramatic life changes, but none of this has materialized. Expectations were raised, and commitments were not delivered. Many men also felt that aid institutions promoted change that was contrary to Islam. One man believed that institutions are "unveiling our women". Another man explained: "In the area of importing or bringing foreign culture and tradition, international organizations have bad effect on Afghan women". A man in his late 20s from Kabul elaborated that "sometimes [aid institutions] are pushing hard for change that is fast and big, and it is not sensible".

"Most men are not very satisfied with the organizations", a man explained, "they feel that these organizations are interfering in family issues". Another man felt that "organizations are creating distance between men and women by encouraging women negatively". Many men expressed concern with the influence aid institutions have had on Afghan culture. They felt that the interventions deliberately sought to enforce Western codes of culture as superior to Afghan ways. "Aid organizations inspired foreign culture on our men. They introduced

[166] Cleaver cites studies by Save the Children UK and Oxfam UK exploring the link between men's employment and their behavior in families. These organizations found that men's reduced employment has given rise to uncertainty about their roles and identities: "Where do men fit in what seems to be a woman's world, when they have no assured identity as the breadwinners?" Cleaver, F., Ed. (2002). Masculinities Matter! Men, Gender and Development. London, Zed Books.

Afghan man incorrectly. And also they brought down their role in the family and society, so it caused difficulties and violences between men and women", one man explained. Again, many men reiterated the notion that aid institutions were stripping men of their rights and giving them to women. This belief reinforces the view that the concept of rights is a zero sum game and that more rights for women leaves men without any rights at all. The following are select quotes from men's interviews to illustrate these points:

- [Institutions] have paid their most attention to women and have forgotten men.
- They don't take care of our poor men.
- In lots of things, more focus is on women than on men.
- Every time first a position is given to women.
- Organizations are not loyal on their promises with men.
- International organizations pave the ground for working for women. And always women are the first, before men.
- They don't do what they say for men.
- In comparison with women, they have done less for men.
- They have done nothing for men, hardly mentioned them. International organizations haven't paid attention to men's rights.

While the Western focus on Afghan 'gender apartheid' has centered around women, the role of men has indeed been ignored. Wali writes that "it may surprise Westerners to discover that the stereotype of Afghan men as women-haters and oppressors is incorrect" (2002: 5). Men in Afghanistan are actually a key part of the solution. And men have suffered as well. The "Afghan problem" should in no way be reduced exclusively to a problem of Afghan women and the *chaddari* (Delloye 2003: 161). No one would dispute the focus on Afghan women, but it is women themselves who highlight the suffering of Afghan men. One Afghan researcher put it this way: "The wound of abandonment runs deep in them. Afraid to be vulnerable, fiercely independent, they hide their wounds. This is the way they have coped with unspeakable hardship and loss" (Sultan 2002: 202).

Many women articulated that they would enjoy greater freedom – and feel more comfortable with the opportunities they have been given – if men were also engaged and employed. In the words of one young woman from Kabul: "Organizations gave opportunities for women to work in NGOs and out of the home. Men need these opportunities also". These women explained that women would be "happier" and "more free" if men were working.

"We want our men to have jobs also so that they can allow us to work," a married women of rural origins explained. Others said: "Men are not working, so women are also kept at home" and, "if all men had wealth and jobs, they would not interfere with the women as much as they do". An Afghanistan specialist reinforces this point in her research, stating that men's unemployment "renders even more slender the margin of liberty left to women in the domestic sphere" (Centlivres-Demont 1994: 354). If liberating women was truly the objective, the aid apparatus would have done better to start with men first. Further quotes from interviews with women elaborate:

- [Institutions] have supported men indirectly by providing jobs and giving trainings to their wives.
- I do not know what opportunities men have. I see many of them without opportunities.
- No men are really involved.
- They have promised to help men also, but they have not done anything.
- Men need to have opportunities like women now so they can work and feel proud.
- Men are suffering more than women right now.
- [Institutions] want to create work opportunities for women, but women cannot take men's position.
- They have done nothing for men, my father says.
- They have made things unequal between men because those who have *wasita*[167] and know people have gotten good jobs and the rest have not.
- Men who know some big people have found a job in the international NGOs.

Women expressed concern that the lack of support for men has made them increasingly angry. Many women explained that they would prefer that their husbands were given equal opportunities to participate in aid interventions and elaborated that their lives would be easier as a result. Some women noted an increased gap between men and women, and many women mentioned increased levels of violence as outcomes of this frustration. One woman explained: "My husband says that they make men angry when they do nothing for them and only offer opportunities to women. He is a teacher so he understands how people think about these things". Another elaborated:

[167] *Wasita* is a Dari term that describes the situation of having special contacts and access.

> *Men have become sensitive about women's organizations. They believe that these organizations train women to stand against the laws and their husbands. Of course this is not true. It is actually what men think.*

This reinforces the importance of *perception* over reality. Another woman explained that men are becoming "more aggressive and angry to women because organizations do not give them any attention". And yet another woman reiterated the same point: "Men are angry with international organizations because they only care about women. Men feel that they have dark futures".

In a speech in 1996, Dupree clearly cautioned against ignoring men:

> *It is useless to start a women's project without getting the cooperation of the men first. This is ignored so many times, and then there are problems... The emphasis must be on the whole family, not on individuals. This would seem to be a very simple, obvious observation, but... [it has] dire consequences for the programmes.*
> (1996: 13-4)

Research revealed that both women and men were concerned with the image the world had of them – an image that they believe has been used to justify aid interventions. The repeated themes included a concern that aid institutions artificially separated women and men – even in cases where they wanted to work together to rebuild the country. Further, there was an overarching perception that aid programs seek to change what is Afghan culture. Both women and men were concerned that men were constructed as the enemy, and women were victims needing to be saved from men by outsiders. An Afghan woman explained: "The world thinks that Afghan women need their help and they need to be saved from Afghan men". An Afghan man elaborated that "most people in other countries believe that Afghan men are the ones who have taken the women's rights from them".

An Afghan man stated that the world must have had a bad image of Afghanistan, or their freedoms would not be under foreign control. A woman elaborated: "I do not think the image was good. If it was good, we would not have so many foreigners coming to say they are helping us". Despite this, many women are happy with aid apparatus support, but also felt that they would like to direct the changes. A young Afghan man explained it best: "The world thought they could bring freedom to Afghan women [but] freedom is only won from

inside". Based on these views, Afghanistan is in the first phase of its engagement with men – near neglect - as previously discussed in Chapter II.

This Road Leads to Turkestan

This phrase was used in an interview with a man who felt particularly frustrated by the lack of progress in Afghanistan and disappointed in the aid apparatus. It is a common Afghan proverb meaning that a certain action will lead nowhere, or is useless. Akram Osman's short stories provide a good definition of the use of the proverb: "In colloquial Dari, Turkestan is often used as the place where someone who is misdirected ends up" (2005: 39).

The following table displays a triangulation of the data gathered from interviews with Afghan women and men based on three large themes that appeared frequently during discussions. 'Agency' refers to a sense that the interviewees' identity was misrepresented. This also reflects a denial of agency and a lack of contextualized analysis that certain respondents believe characterized interventions. The theme 'Violence' refers to references – direct or indirect – that were made by interviewees regarding increased levels of violence in their lives, or the fear of increased violence. The category 'Aid' represents those interviewees who expressed a level of dissatisfaction with aid interventions. Concrete examples of dissatisfaction include: excessive focus on women, mismanaged or misdirected aid, failure to deliver on promises, raised expectations. Neglect of men in aid interventions began as a component of dissatisfaction with 'Aid' but then emerged as its own category because of its significance to the interviewees.

The table offers a comparison between men and women across the above three themes and in three demographic categories. Women and men are analyzed based on their geographic origins (rural, urban, Kabul) and their marital status (single, married, widowed) and their education levels (none, 1-6 years, more than 7 years) to determine if there are trends within particular demographic groups. These themes are the ones that women and men identified as the most significant issues.

Comparison Between Women and Men Across Three Themes

		AGENCY	VIOLENCE	AID
TOTAL		76	47	70
TOTAL %		63%	39%	58%
MEN TOTAL		**31**	**14**	**32**
Region:	Kabul	8	3	6
	Rural	22	8	23
	Urban	1	3	3
Marital Status:	Single	17	6	13
	Married	14	8	19
	Widower	0	0	0
Education:	None	1	1	2
	1-6 years	8	4	11
	7+ years	22	9	19
WOMEN TOTAL		**45**	**33**	**38**
Region:	Kabul	13	11	11
	Rural	30	21	26
	Urban	2	1	1
Marital Status:	Single	20	11	14
	Married	18	20	18
	Widower	7	2	6
Education:	None	28	24	26
	1-6 years	7	6	5
	7+ years	10	3	7

Of those men who expressed dissatisfaction with aid programs and agencies, the majority are from rural areas (72%), married (59%), and have had seven or more years of education (59%). For women, the majority are also from rural areas (68%), and married (47%), but those with no education felt more strongly about aid issues (68%) than did those with increased education, as previously addressed.

Alam, Aman, and Ahmadi: Men Speak Out

An impromptu focus group was held with three men who worked in the office where I frequently visited. They were curious about my research and began a discussion in my presence.

Alam was a Pashtun man in his late 20s from Wardak with four years of education. He was married, and had recently become a father. When asked about the role of women in Afghanistan, he became visibly uncomfortable and said he did not want to answer. He was also not comfortable talking about his wife, but he did tell the group that his wife had six

years of education. He laughed when the comment was made that his wife was more educated than he is. "My wife is not working", Alam said. "If she said she wanted to work, it would not be allowed according to tribal regulations. It is this way. I cannot explain it".

Alam's wife wears the *chaddari*. He emphasized that this is an important part of the Pashtun tradition. But then he went on to say this:

> *The chaddari is not important, but what is important for a woman is modesty and reputation and to have a good character. If she decides tomorrow that she does not want to wear it, it's no problem for me.*

The other men in the room snickered at this response. They did not believe him. They knew each other well and were able to recognize the others' dishonesty.

Aman was in his mid-20s, a Tajik. He worked as a driver. He spoke more freely of his wife: "She studied up to 8-class and is at home. She is not working. First she doesn't want to work. But if she wanted it would be no problem for me".

The two other men in the room said that he did not answer honestly. They did not believe him. Aman smiled sheepishly. He continued to talk about the *chaddari*:

> *My grandfather said my wife should use chaddari. My wife wasn't using chaddari before. He died three days ago and now I decide if she wears it or not. But she knows that she has to wear it out of respect for my grandfather.*

Ahmadi was a 30-year old Hazara man. He was the most vocal of the three, and also the most willing to talk about these delicate issues with a non-Afghan woman. He said:

> *There is equality of rights between men and women. Woman is respectable and has a top position in our society because woman is mother and wife. There is a Dari saying: the second mother is our country. So this is how much we respect our women.*

Ahmadi continued to talk about the role of religion in Afghanistan: "We are Muslim so we respect that. And also the customs of Afghanistan are important to us".

Ahmadi was the most comfortable talking about his wife:

> *My wife is not working. But she doesn't want to work. She takes care of the kids. Most of the women in this country want to have children. It's not a pressure from the husbands to have children. There is not any limitation on my wife. But she is from a conservative family. My wife was using chaddari before she married. But sometimes she doesn't wear chaddari, but only chador. If she doesn't want to wear it, I will decide at that time. In Afghanistan the joint family system is important. All sides must be respected. If an elder says that my wife must do something, she must do it.*

These three men approached me of their own accord and began a discussion that appeared to be new to them. The questions stimulated much discussion, thought, and even discomfort. The relevance of this discussion with men was that they took the initiative to discuss these issues. While in some instances it was obvious that two of the men were trying to tell me what they thought I might want to hear, this was quickly corrected by the other participants. This group of men was also noteworthy because they represent three different ethnic groups and could have opposing opinions, particularly from the Pashtun man, and even more so when discussing women. Further, these men shared one important thing that none of the other men interviewed have – these men are all gainfully employed (as driver, guard, and 'fixer'[168]). Regardless of type of employment, these men were all the authority figures at home because they were fulfilling their traditional roles. Their wives did not work, and none of them felt that they necessarily had any trouble at home. They agreed that they have unquestioned authority because they are male, and that they were fulfilling their obligations under that role.

5. Implications at Family and Community Levels

The following table provides a comparison between Afghan men and women, non-Afghan policy-makers and policy implementers (referred to below as "Aid") and specialists, and Afghan policy-makers and policy implementers and specialists. The three themes that emerged from the data are compared based on their frequency. These themes emerged in all categories, demonstrating that there are large trends and patterns in opinions, regardless of people's particular groupings or affiliations.

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[168] A 'fixer' is defined as one who arranges logistics, handles procurement of goods and services, and generally runs errands for the institution.

Comparison Across Groups and Themes

	# INTERVIEWED	**AGENCY**	**VIOLENCE**	**AID**
AFGHAN WOMEN & MEN				
TOTAL	121	76	47	70
TOTAL %	100%	63%	39%	58%
AFGHAN AID/SPECIALISTS				
TOTAL	25	19	14	25
TOTAL %	100%	76%	59%	100%
NON-AFGHAN AID/SPECIALISTS				
TOTAL	20	16	9	19
TOTAL %	100%	78%	43%	95%

Of the 25 Afghan Aid and Specialists, 19 (76%) believed that men had been neglected in aid interventions. For the non-Afghan Aid and Specialists, 78% (16 of 20) believed that men's needs were neglected. Again, these findings resonate with the data from Afghan men and women – that the perception that men have been neglected is a powerful force that could be destabilizing the aid interventions.

> *International aid has a long and controversial record in Afghanistan. The wrong kinds of aid have at times created perverse incentives leading to renewed conflict. In the future, donors and aid agencies must be more self-critical and aware of these potentially negative effects.*
> (UNDP and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2004: 219)

Inja Afghanistan Ast: *Profiles of Women and Couples*

The oft-repeated phrase, *inja Afghanistan ast,* meaning "This is Afghanistan", was used both by men and women frequently to punctuate a phrase. Women used it in exasperation to rationalize 'bad things' that happened to them. Men used this line to justify 'the situation of women' and as a counter to strong pushes for change and importing alien ideologies. "This is Afghanistan," I was told on many occasions. "Those things just don't work here". Both women and men conveyed a sense that because "This is Afghanistan", things were not going to change – and certainly not in the way that the aid apparatus expected. It was therefore important to compare not only women and men as separate entities but also women and men from the same household in order to determine how they define what

Afghanistan is within their own households. Profiles of ten couples can be found in Appendix 3. The profiles of couples reveal the differing dynamics between men and women animating each household. This will be discussed in the conclusion and checked against women's life stories and histories to provide a deeper analysis.

Qatra qatra darya mesha
Drop by drop, water becomes a river

This Afghan expression has been employed as a saying used to advance the women's movement. It advocates slow, gradual change. In this vein, it is important to observe Afghan women 'drop by drop' in order to better understand the significance of the changes in their lives over time. Appendix 4 provides life stories from selected women who were interviewed. These women all felt the need to talk about their lives and their contexts. Many women began the interviews with stories of their past as a way to illustrate their unhappiness in the present and the extent to which their lives have not improved. The stories of Nargis, Anisa, and Zarmina (found in the Methodology) represent the sentiments of women who were filled with hope in 2002. They believed that their participation in aid interventions would better their lives. The 20 additional profiles were collected three years after those of Nargis, Anisa, and Zarmina. They provide a sample of the perceptions and experiences of women four years into Afghanistan's aftermath. There is more sadness that characterizes these stories, and noticeably less hope. There is also a hint of disappointment in the lack of changes in their lives in the last three years. In fact, these women felt that their expectations were raised and now their hopes are further thwarted. Their stories speak to these themes.

In Appendix 5 are two more detailed profiles of Afghan women at seemingly opposite ends of the spectrum. Both of these women spoke at great length about their lives and offered more detailed profiles. They present an interesting comparison, as one woman is career-driven, successful, and employed in a traditionally male field in a high-ranking position. She does not represent the norm. The other is uneducated and relies on charity and aid interventions for her subsistence. The former has chosen to remain without a husband. The latter woman is burdened by a husband who cannot support her and feels she has suffered more because she lacks male protection. One feels like a victim, the other like a survivor. These women share some perspectives, however. They both believe that Afghan women can stand on their own and can act on their own behalf, to better their lives. They both believe that an Afghanistan with foreign influence has only served to retard progress for

women. They believe that the right pace of social change is one that is instigated by Afghans – men and women – and that only this way will Afghanistan achieve 'liberation'. Their sentiments are reinforced by Beall's hope, that "the complexity of women and men's social roles is recognized and their involvement in the control of their everyday lives is welcomed" (1996: 2).

Conclusions

In an article written in 2004, Nancy Hatch Dupree cautioned:

> *Hopefully, the aid community will heed the lessons learned over the past decades. Programs are needed to promote the integrity of the family, for one can ignore the family only at the cost of social stability.*
> (2004: 326)

Analysis at the family level is relevant because it demonstrates the importance of not extracting women from their families and contexts. Emergent themes from the profiles of couples resonate with those in women's life stories and histories. Firstly, both women and men feel that the focus on women has come at the expense of men. They feel that men's honor has been compromised by their neglect in aid interventions. Men and women largely agree that new elements of disagreement, conflict, and even violence, have entered their lives. They feel that this is due in part to the perception that their values and socio-cultural systems have been compromised by an 'ideological occupation'. Their differences and diversity – as Afghans – as not been recognized[169]. It is problematic to refer to 'Afghan women' as a homogenous group. Finally, they share a sense of disillusionment with the aid apparatus. These themes resonate with those that characterize this research: the centrality of honor, the denial of agency, the dissatisfaction with aid, and the exercise of agency through Afghan efforts to deal with these social changes on their own terms. Building on the previous discussion, the following chapter focuses in-depth on violence as an unintended effect.

[169] This view was reinforced by an Afghan NGO worker, as one example: "All the people, in the media, everywhere, say 'Afghan community' as if it is one body". Indeed, very few generalizations can be made about Afghans or Afghan women as a whole.

Afghanistan aspires to become a state that is pluralistic, Islamic, prosperous, and peace-loving (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2006), but the challenges are great. As discussed in Chapter I, Afghanistan has some of the worst social indicators in the world, particularly for women. Many analysts and activists note that women remain oppressed in Afghanistan, despite the oft-cited rhetoric of 'liberation' of Afghan women. It has been said repeatedly that women are not yet able to enjoy their human rights. "Discriminatory practices institutionalized prior to and during the war have not disappeared and in some ways have grown stronger. The insecure environment exacerbates this further"(Amnesty International 2005). Amnesty International elaborates that the violence suffered during the years of conflict under various regimes was an extreme manifestation of the discrimination and abuses suffered before conflict as well as the unequal power relations between Afghan men and women (2005). Violence against women in Afghanistan must first be viewed as part of a larger landscape that has been shaped by Afghan history.

1. Violence in Afghanistan's Aftermath

In a speech to the Ministry of Defense, former Deputy Minister of Women's Affairs Mazari Safa explained that women still suffer from deprivation and oppression, even several years after the conflict has ended. She explained that women are still abused, prevented from accessing education and economic opportunities, and unable to participate in public life (Safa 2005, 13 September). The former Minister of Women's Affairs, Masuda Jalal, has made numerous speeches about the prevalence of violence against women. In one such speech on women's rights and security in July 2005, she said:

> *It has been more than three years since we embarked on a journey to peace and reconstruction. Our people have embraced peace... but unfortunately this is not true for many of our women... real peace has never entered their sphere of life. A different kind of conflict continues to haunt our women... They live in constant fear of being beaten, harassed, abused verbally, discriminated, denied of rights, robbed of self respect and dignity, exchanged for material goods or for settling conflicts. War has never been over for them.*
> (2005, 27 June)

In further conversations with Masuda Jalal, she had the following to say about violence against women and the existing – and increasing – disparities between women and men:

> *Even after three years of attention to women, it has not succeeded in making women equal to men in practical life. In the practical life, at the family and community level, power is still in men's hands. The economy of the home, the economy of the country, all this belongs to men. 100%. Still. So what have we given women in the past three years?*
>
> *We have given them opportunities for education. But not for all of them. Only those in urban areas. And even then not all of them. We can open up the gates of schools to them and take away all discriminatory laws – but even then it's not complete because that's only the Constitution and we have other discriminatory laws that are written and unwritten. And we have given them security, generally that has improved but still not fully. Work opportunities, those are limited. Only urban areas again. And we have given them opportunities in political life. We have a number of ministers in the cabinet*[170]*. But still... all this does not mean equality in their lives. Not at all.*
>
> *The violence is still going on. It is increasing, even. There has been no positive impact on violence in the last three years. It has not decreased, for sure. If we take deaths of women as an indicator, those deaths that have taken place in Herat and other places, self-burning and other things. This happens more than the media reports. I hear these things from the head of the Women's Unit in those places. If we take all this into account, it has increased. Forced marriages are going on, and more than before. Domestic violence is more than before. There is no change in terms of legal protection for women. Small small interventions are taking place, but that has had no impact. So we need to do a lot. For a country where the load of centuries of discrimination is on the shoulders of women, with this little investment in three years it is not possible to give them real equality and freedom and justice*[171]*.*

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[170] There is now only one woman in the Afghan cabinet – the Minister of Women's Affairs. The rest were not approved by the parliament.

[171] In meetings and discussions with senior gender policy-makers who work closely with the former Minister of Women's Affairs and also serve as senior members of the Advisory Group on Gender, I was told that it is a "widely held belief" (by these particular policy-makers as well as others who were not present) that the Minister herself was a victim of domestic violence. It is believed that this was due to tensions between the Minster and her husband over her position of power.

Afghan women today are still battered in the home, harassed in public places, married off without their consent, and traded and exchanged to resolve disputes (Safa 2005, 13 September). This belief is reinforced by the Report of the UN Secretary General on The Situation of Women and Girls in Afghanistan (2004) which states that "the volatile security situation and traditional social and cultural norms continue to limit women's and girls' role in public life and deny them the full enjoyment of their rights" (2004). There is further evidence of violence against women in the private sphere. Researcher Pamela Hunte's study on livelihoods of the urban poor in Kabul revealed a number of cases of violent conflict between men and women, which may be "attributed to the trying economic conditions resulting from war and displacement" (2004: 14). She further points to deprivation and insecurity having psychological effects on Afghans, particularly those in Kabul who have come to the city seeking greater security and economic opportunity. Hunte argues that expectations have been raised and media messages of "large amounts of foreign aid coming into the country for reconstruction... has created expectations of greater amounts of assistance than can be fulfilled" (2004: 14). Further, people's *perceptions* are that they are not benefiting from the much-publicized assistance to the country. Hunte concludes that "it is not surprising that many individuals feel extremely frustrated, confused, and angry about their present lack of access to promised aid" (2004: 15). This displacement of anger is not unusual, as Afghans can generally not point to any improvements in their own lives and as a result, anger is directed "to the place where they feel they have dominance – their relations with women" (Johnson and Leslie 2004: 23).

Policy-makers, researchers, and experts argue that violence against women exists, but there are few reliable statistics[172]. RAWA states that officials estimate that at least half of all Afghan women have been forced into marriage, and that one in three have been beaten or abused[173]. The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission registered over 1,650 cases of violence against women in 2006 – and many cases have gone unreported[174]. Furthermore, this violence is concentrated in Kabul. Afghans feel that violence against women will continue – and gender inequalities will increase – as long as Afghanistan is under occupation and as long as aid institutions and the Afghan government fail to make improvements in the lives of the majority of Afghans. A RAWA article explains:

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[172] As one example, see Rostami-Povey, E. (2007). Afghan Women: Identity and Invasion. London, Zed Books.
[173] For further information, see www.rawa.org.
[174] www.rawa.org/temp/runews/2007/03/08/afghanistan-women-s-hopes-for-equality-fade.htm

The Taliban used the "women's question" to enforce its own agenda. The imperialist occupation forces have also used the agenda of gender equality to ultimately pursue their own interests: the occupation of Afghanistan for strategic geo-political reasons. In the eyes of many people, the ministry of women is associated with the occupation[175].

Indeed, the increased levels of violence against women are attributed largely to poverty, the ongoing occupation, and the failure of the aid apparatus to make real changes to women's lives. Backlashes against women in the aftermath are not unusual, and take the form of continued wartime aggression in addition to new forms of violence (Pankhurst 2007). There is worldwide evidence that violence against women predominates in situations of poverty, particularly where women gain economic independence while men remain unemployed (Pankhurst 2007). If such socio-economic changes provoke violence against women, perhaps more caution could have been taken in design of gender interventions. Pankhurst articulates that the backlash argument – often ignored in policy circles – remains challenging to explain. Through this research, I hope to offer one part of this complex and multifaceted story – a nuanced understanding of this phenomenon in the Afghan context.

2. Understanding Violence in the Aftermath[176]

Data and Assumptions

The greatest challenge in doing research on violence against women is in accessing information. Available information in Afghanistan is based largely on anecdotal evidence. Data is not yet widely available, although select research is underway[177]. In the few cases where figures are available, these may in fact underestimate reality. In Afghanistan, many refuse to acknowledge violence against women as an issue. In addition, women – and men - have different definitions of what constitutes violence. Violence against women in the context of intimacy is often not recognized and labeled as such. This is viewed by women as within the realm of normal gender relations and not assumed to be an abuse of women's human rights. In fact, Amnesty International reports a general perception among women

[175] www.rawa.org/temp/runews/2007/03/03/afghanistan-no-gender-equality-under-occupation.htm
[176] Segments of this section were published in an edited book on domestic violence though the Peaceful Families Project: Abirafeh, L. (2007). Freedom is Only Won from the Inside: Domestic Violence in Post-Conflict Afghanistan Change From Within: Diverse Perspectives on Domestic Violence in Muslim Communities. M. Alkhateeb and S. E. Abugideiri. Washington DC, Peaceful Families Project.
[177] UNIFEM, Global Rights, and the Ministry of Women's Affairs are all in the process of conducting research.

that violence was to be expected in their lives (2005). Women who recognize violence against them are still not likely to change or address it. Such women recognize the added challenge this presents to gender relations, which could in turn provoke additional violence.

Women may be reluctant to speak publicly about the violence they have feared, witnessed, or experienced for fear of being stigmatized. In addition, there is a perception that violence against women in the domestic sphere is a private affair that should be addressed within families and not revealed to outsiders. The concern is that such public admissions will bring shame to the family. Violence against women is often disguised and denied within the family to retain honor and standing within the community. In addition to the fear of social stigma and the blame they may receive, women are reluctant to report violence because existing institutions are not equipped to take action and protect them. Reporting the crime may place the woman at greater risk. The crime itself may not be recorded or classified as a crime by the institution. In Afghanistan, women's complaints of violence are often disregarded by national institutions, such as the Afghan National Police. Thus, women run the risk of exposing themselves to additional violence from the community, the institutions, and the state. It is difficult to measure rates of violence accurately, particularly when there is a social stigma attached. In a context of changing gender roles and relations, the space created for women may bring resentment and backlash, manifesting in a shift from public to private violence. When public violence turns private, it then becomes hidden from policy-makers and is beyond the purview of aid institution priorities[178]. Indeed, this reinforces the possibility, posited in Chapter II, that a shift is taking place from a public to a private patriarchy.

In early 2006, UNIFEM began a nationwide effort to collect data for a comprehensive database on violence against women in order to analyze trends, determine strategies for action, and provide response mechanisms and services[179]. Global Rights is currently conducting a national survey on domestic violence with 4,500 people in 16 provinces[180]. There are very few statistics to demonstrate violence against women in Afghanistan, and even fewer figures that are reliable. A 2003 study found that nearly 60% of the several hundred women interviewed had experienced some kind of domestic violence (Terre des Hommes 2003). In the case of a drastic increase in statistics of violence in a given time, one

[178] For additional information, see Barry, J. (2005). Rising Up in Response: Women's Rights Activism in Conflict. Boulder, Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights.
[179] www.unifem.org/news_events/story_detail.php?StoryID=412
[180] For more information, see http://www.globalrights.org/site/PageServer?pagename=www_asi_index_58

cannot necessarily assume that rates of violence have increased. There might be other factors that contribute to the sudden change. Perhaps reporting procedures have become less arduous. Perhaps women are part of an organization or support group that is encouraging them to speak out. It is precisely these trends that make reporting on violence even more challenging. Statistics are unreliable, and quantitative data is difficult to obtain. But this effort requires more than just figures and statistics. Structural issues need to be identified and addressed. Patterns of abuse and discrimination need to be revealed and studied. And root causes of violence in Afghan society must be understood in context. In this vein, qualitative evidence that examines perceptions and experiences should be given significant weight.

Finally, it is worth briefly stating that not all Afghan women are victims, as discussed earlier. Not all Afghan men are perpetrators. Not all women are inherently peaceful. And not all men are bellicose. Such constructions reinforce patriarchal models of the gender order and negate patterns of violence practiced by women and patterns of peace practiced by men (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children 2005). It is important to recognize that not all violence against women is at the hands of men. There are various examples across cultures and histories to demonstrate that women have the capacity for violence against each other. This ranges from female genital cutting – where young girls are mutilated by the hands of older women – to the violence perpetrated on a new bride by her mother-in-law. While it is important to acknowledge such incidents, it is clear that in the majority of cases, women are primarily victims of violence perpetrated by men. In Afghanistan, new brides can face abuse from their female in-laws, particularly if the marriage is the result of *Bad* (giving a female relative to the victim's family to settle a crime) or *Badal* (giving a female relative in marriage in return for a bride). If the bride remains childless, violence can also result. The forms of such violence perpetrated by women often entails abuse of power and could lead to psychological and physical abuse.

Forms and Patterns

There is a nascent understanding that particular forms of violence against women – particularly domestic violence – increase after a conflict[181]. In Afghanistan today, it is not

[181] Barry and others speak well to this. See Barry, J. (2005). Rising Up in Response: Women's Rights Activism in Conflict. Boulder, Urgent Action Fund for Women's Human Rights.

unusual to hear women say that they felt 'safer' under the Taliban[182]. Violence against women is believed to be pervasive in Afghanistan, although little data exists to support this. The Ministry of Women's Affairs has called violence against women in Afghanistan a violation of human rights and an abuse that is sustained by a patriarchy that supports abuse and dehumanization of women. Violence against women also has significant economic and social costs, impairing women from actively and effectively participating in society and in their own – and ultimately Afghanistan's – development (Jalal 2005, 27 June). The report of Yakin Erturk, the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, in July of 2005 notes that violence against women continues to be pervasive in Afghanistan. Erturk cites four reasons for the perpetuation of violence: (1) the traditional patriarchal gender order, (2) the erosion of protective social mechanisms, (3) the lack of rule of law, and (4) poverty and insecurity (2005: 2). She states that "efforts to improve the status of women in Afghanistan are intimately associated with the challenge of multiple transitions confronting Afghan society today" (2005: 2).

In this case, it is possible to build on Erturk's work by adding a fifth element, the idea raised by many Afghan men and women that aid institutions are provoking a change in gender relations. New forms of violence are emerging as a result of women's increased visibility outside the home. Such violence is beyond social, ethnic, religious, tribal, or economic boundaries. The space created for women may bring resentment and backlash, driving violence further into the private domain. Afghanistan specialist Sarah Kamal notes:

> *Many Afghans dismiss the reconstruction period's emphasis on women's participation as being 'overly Western' or a corruption of Afghan society and morals... [Further] some men feel that opportunities for women surpass those open to men, and there are occasional indications that resentment against women has increased as a result.* (2006: 2)

Afghanistan's Millennium Development Goals Report for 2005 states the "silent epidemic" of violence against women is due to the combination of their "low status" and years of conflict (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2005). Violence against women in Afghanistan is widespread and ranges from deprivation of education to economic opportunities, through

[182] Corrin and others reinforce this view. See Corrin, C. (2004). International and Local Interventions to Reduce Gender-based Violence Against Women in Post-Conflict Situations, http://www.wider.unu.edu/conference/conference-2004-1/conference%202004-1-papers/Corrin-3105.pdf.

verbal and psychological violence, beatings, sexual violence and killings. Many acts of violence involve traditional practices including the betrothal of young girls in infancy, early marriage and crimes of 'honor', where a female is punished for having offended custom, tradition or honor (Amnesty International 2005). Afghanistan's National Development Strategy – the government's overarching strategy for promoting growth, generating wealth and reducing poverty and vulnerability[183] – also sees widespread inequalities for women. The Constitution of Afghanistan guarantees gender equality, however women lack legal awareness and many do not effectively enjoy the Constitutionally-guaranteed equal protection of the law. It further states that "discriminatory provisions in laws and policies are still prevalent and have not been made consistent with the Constitution" (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2006).

According to Afghan tradition, females in the family are under the authority of the father or husband. They suffer restricted freedom of movement and nearly no control over the choices that govern their lives. Most women will not have the opportunity to assert economic and social independence, nor to enjoy their human rights. Girls are not given say over choice of husbands and find that they are abused and mistreated in the husband's home. Those who try to escape the abuse are stigmatized, isolated, and possibly imprisoned. Forced and underage marriages are also prevalent. Reports emerging from UNIFEM and the Ministry of Women's Affairs indicate that approximately 60-80% of all marriages are forced, and occur frequently as payment for debt or to settle a feud (2005). According to Amnesty International, a child marriage is by definition a forced marriage, "as a child cannot be considered to have consented freely" (2005). The selling and trafficking of women is increasing. Activists and specialists have expressed concern that domestic violence is widespread in Afghanistan and there remains little public awareness, prevention, or response. Cases are not reported, and in the rare cases where they are reported, they are not properly recorded. The Ministry of Women's Affairs Legal Department recorded 583 reported cases in 2004, and it is likely that many more cases remain unreported (2005). Violence against women and the absence of effective redress for victims, whether through informal or formal justice mechanisms, is a pervasive human rights problem in Afghanistan (Ministry of Women's Affairs 2005).

[183] http://www.af/nds/#1

Other forms of violence against women in Afghanistan include *Bad* and *Badal* (as previously mentioned), along with the practice of exchanging girls for cattle or material goods, and the recently well-publicized self-immolation, which entails women inflicting harm upon themselves to end their suffering. Amnesty International reports that the majority of self-immolation victims they interviewed had attempted to kill themselves as a result of violence in the family[184]. This phenomenon has been studied and publicized in Herat and is prevalent all over Afghanistan. In fact, the common perception that self-immolation occurs with greater frequency in Herat is simply because that is where the incident was first exposed – and therefore where most journalists restricted their focus. Violence against women in Afghanistan can also include intimidation of women in the form of sexual or derogatory comments, harassment, and other means of drawing boundaries and delineating women's 'place' in the gender order[185].

Studies demonstrate that it is not unusual for men to use violence against women as a means of establishing and maintaining power relationships and structural inequalities (Paci 2002; Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children 2005). In short, one strategy for safeguarding the present gender order is to employ violence against women. Research by UNIFEM elaborates that "men's traditional roles have been threatened and rather than finding alternative roles, men have in some cases sought to assert their masculinity through... domestic violence" (IRIN 2004: 7). In cases where men employ such violence, women's choices, safety, and behavior is restricted as a result. In fact, "the formation of dominant and violent military masculinities in conflict zones around the world, for example, creates extreme forms of gender oppression" (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children 2005: 12). Several researchers, such as Chris Corrin, have noted this unfortunate trend. She explains that "in parts of Afghanistan women have stated that the insecurity and risk of sexual assault they face make their lives worse than during the Taliban era" (2004: 11). Corrin attributes this to the absence of rule of law beyond the capital and the continued presence of illegal armed groups.

[184] Amnesty International (2005). Afghanistan: Women Still Under Attack – A Systematic Failure to Protect, http://web.amnesty.org/library/print/ENGASA110072005.
[185] For further discussion, see Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children (2005). Masculinities: Male Roles and Male Involvement in the Promotion of Gender Equality. New York, Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children.

Other Countries and Cases

Having said all of this, it is worthwhile noting that violence against women is not exclusive to contexts such as Afghanistan. So-called 'third world' violence against women is viewed by those outside as a 'death by culture', in Narayan's words (1997). It is important to think of the context that is lost – and the new one that is gained – when issues of violence against women cross borders and become part of a Western feminist agenda. These 'other' issues of 'other' women are subsequently adopted (read: hijacked) by academics and feminists and become part of what the West understands 'third world gender issues' to be. If these issues occur in Muslim countries, they then become 'Muslim issues' and they continue to be misconstrued and de-contextualized with increasing publicity (1997).

Examples from other countries emerging from conflict seem to demonstrate that increased domestic violence forms an unfortunate component of the aftermath agenda. "In virtually all post-conflict settings, [domestic violence] is acknowledged as a component of the "culture of violence" that ensues from war" (Ward 2002). The UN Secretary-General's Report on Women, Peace and Security states that domestic violence is one particular form that continues after the conflict[186]. In the aftermath, conditions for women risk further deterioration, violence tends to increase, and the potential for future conflict is likely. It is in this context that international attention and support begin to wane (Barry 2005: 70). However, Human Rights Watch reports that during the reconstruction process in the aftermath, violence against women is often ignored or relegated to low-priority status compared with other concerns (1999). Indeed, as previously mentioned, violence against women is not even a precursor for peace, according to the Peace Index as mentioned in Chapter I.

The experience of women in Bosnia is an oft-cited case to demonstrate the trend of increased violence against women in post-conflict contexts. Violence was inflicted upon Bosnian women at the hands of demobilized soldiers in the form of domestic violence. Similarly in Rwanda, women experienced increased violence following the conflict and became 'soft' outlets for men's frustrations. Research on increased violence in post-conflict Guatemala notes that despite a decline in political violence, social violence was increasing (Moser and McIlwaine 2001: 41). In addition, there was a notable shift to increased urban-

[186] UN S/2002/1154

based violence coupled with a general sense of lawlessness and disorder. Afghanistan is experiencing a similar phenomenon. Manifestations of the current crisis of poverty and vulnerability in urban areas includes domestic violence and social breakdown alongside increased crime rates (UNDP and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2004: 56). Similarly, in Angola, many men were left unemployed following the conflict. Research revealed that men felt undermined by the fact that they were unable to contribute to the household and that instead women were supporting the families. As a result, men's frustrations led to increased violence against women, coupled with greater drug and alcohol use (IRIN 2004: 18).

Myriad reports have explained that there are consequences for women when, in the context of conflict and the aftermath, men perceive that they have lost their traditional roles. One such example is the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children who state that:

> *While women are often marginalized and excluded during their displacement, humanitarian organizations often attempt to focus on women which can lead to their empowerment... This may further alienate the men.*
> (2006: 16)

Simon Turner's research in the Lukole Refugee Camp in Tanzania revealed striking similarities to Afghanistan. Turner noted that UNHCR efforts to empower women through aid interventions had negative effects. He explains that the men felt threatened by the perceived loss of their position as breadwinners and figures of authority. In short, they felt as if the "UNCHR was taking their authority and their women from them" (Turner 2000: 8). Turner elaborated that feelings of loss following a conflict – particularly feelings of social and moral decay – are interpreted in terms of gender relations, which are, in turn, projected as resentment toward the agency that is attempting to take 'their' women and 'their' masculinity (2000). Turner also notes that women in so-called empowerment programs were not particularly in favor of 'equality'. In fact, women gave half of their financial support from the agency to their husbands so as not to antagonize them (2000)[187].

While not in conflict or the aftermath, research in Atzompa, Mexico, also bears resemblance to Afghanistan. Researcher Ramona Perez writes that women feel compelled to accept

[187] I have noted the same trend in Afghanistan where women are cautious to present cash and in-kind earnings to male members of the family to appease them and to secure their continued participation in the aid program.

increased male violence as a reaction to men's own sense of displacement as women are granted greater economic opportunities (2002: 32). She says the following about this particular case:

> *This indicates a complex 'developmental' process in which economic benefits for women are offset by an intensification of patriarchal violence. This dynamic problematizes the very category of development with its notion of progress, since material 'progress' entails a regression – an escalation in male violence.*
> (2002: 32)

Increased violence against women in the aftermath is not just a phenomenon of the developing world. In fact, research in the United States following Hurricane Katrina revealed that American men are also susceptible to violence in times of uncertainty:

> *Especially when so much is out of their control in Katrina's aftermath, men without jobs... may feel unmasked and unmanly... Some men will cope through drugs, alcohol, physical aggression or all three, hurting themselves and putting the women and girls around them at risk. We can count on increased reports of violence against women as this is so common in US and international disasters.*
> (Enarson 2005: 2)

3. Evidence of Violence as an Unintended Effect

When poverty walks in through the door, happiness flies out through the window.
- Afghan proverb indicating that poverty brings trouble and difficulties at home.

Perceptions

Policy-makers, policy implementers, NGO leaders, and Afghan specialists 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 men's inability to access trainings and economic opportunities. Afghan history demonstrates that this is not unusual. 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 aid institution 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.*

An Afghan NGO leader elaborated:

> *Men and women are not ready to accept the extent of freedom that Westerners are asking for in their programs in Afghanistan. People become sensitive to the fact that Afghan women are expected to dress in Western style – if they are 'liberated' – and to work very closely with men and foreigners. That is the reason violence against women has increased. If the status quo continues, there will be more violence against women. Instead, it should change to a more Afghan – more slow – pace. Change doesn't need to be revolutionary for it to work.*

Another gender specialist shared her experience:

> *There were several cases known to me where women were being abused by their husbands for taking classes and participating in women's workshops. Some women became scared and stopped attending. Fathers, brothers, husbands were never involved in any of the programming activities.*

Some policy-makers and policy implementers attributed the perceived increase in violence against women to a general sense of lawlessness and disorder that characterizes countries in the aftermath. A gender advisor continued:

> *If in fact violence has increased, my guess at the main reason would be a growing insecurity toward the position of women in the home/community and the fear of Westernization. In short, a backlash against various trends – some good and some decidedly bad – that have come due to Afghanistan opening up to the West, not to mention the sudden and dramatic increase of Western individuals and organizations... If we compare to other post-conflict countries, it's possible to predict*

that violence against women is greater here because of the increased power of the mafias and warlords, exacerbated income disparities, the continuously unstable situation, and trauma in men that leads to violence.

Indeed, Kandiyoti reinforces this point in her research on Afghanistan, arguing that violations of women's rights are determined by mutually reinforcing influences: gender disadvantage, erosion of livelihoods, poverty, lawlessness, insecurity. Further, poverty and displacement have eroded social safety nets in form of family and kinship ties (2005: 13). The gender officer for an international agency put it this way:

There are hardly any reports focusing especially on violence against women from different periods during the conflict. However, I would not be surprised if there was a rise in domestic violence as part of post-conflict developments. There seems to have been an increase in kidnappings and trafficking.

Most of those interviewed, however, could not confirm an increase in violence against women, per se, but certainly suspected that this was the case. Many cited concerns of an imminent backlash, or the possibility that the backlash was already underway. An Afghan woman policy-maker in an aid institution had the following to say:

There is a kind of negative idea among the people [on gender] that has to be corrected. And some people think that too much goes to women. The communities are sometimes not ready to accept the changes in women's situation. For them it is too much and too fast. One way for men to not give women what they want is to use violence against them. There is a backlash at the speed of change and the focus of foreign aid, women being the focus.

Afghan Voices on Violence

Of the14 (out of 50) men who expressed concern that violence was increasing, the majority are from rural origins (57%), married (57%), and have a high level of education (64%). The majority of women who reported incidents of violence or fear of violence were from rural origins, married, and with no education. Of the 33 (out of 71) women who believed that violence was increasing, the majority are also rural (64%) and married (61%). However, regarding education levels, the majority of women who expressed concern that violence

was increasing come from the category that has had no education (73%). In terms of level of education, this is opposite to the men in that men in the highest education category were more conscious of increased violence than those with less education.

During the interviews, participants were not asked specifically about violence. Instead, they were given the opportunity to share their own perceptions of how gender roles and relations are changing and how they are at present. In so doing, it was not assumed *a priori* that violence would be an important issue. Instead violence emerged from the interviewees themselves when they found it to be an issue that was relevant to the discussion.

Interviewees – particularly women - also alluded to violence without specifically stating it. Examples include referring to increased verbal abuse, decreased mobility, increased fighting in the family, and statements such as "he makes things more difficult for me now". Terms to connote increased violence include 'danger' and 'fighting'. In Dari, the term for violence, *tashadud*, generally refers to political conflict and violence on a large scale, unless *tashadud aley-he zanaan* - violence against women - is referred to specifically. The more common term for violence against women in the form of domestic violence is *khshoonat aley-he zanaan*. The term for conflict, *kash-ma-kash*, was generally not employed for the home. Women used *nezaa* – fighting - more frequently along with words that connote 'family problems' or 'family concerns'. Women also expressed the fear - *tarsidah* - of increased violence in the future and the sense that this was to be anticipated as a result of present status. For both men and women, a mention of violence did not always mean that they are personally facing violence in the home. This was true for some cases, but further in-depth study is needed to explore this trend. Violence in the home should also be put in the context of a general sense of frustration, lawlessness, and disorder. This is particularly relevant given recent incidents of public violence and the increasing tension in Afghanistan.

Afghan men who addressed issues of increased violence did not do so directly, but implied that conflicts at home were becoming an increasing part of their lives. For instance, one man explained that "relations between men and women have gotten worse than in previous periods". Another stated that "fear still exists" between men and women and that "relations are not so good like before". Men referred to difficulties at home and increased pressure. One man even said: "I wish that men should give up irrational discrimination and violence against women". An Afghan man in his late 20s from Kabul put it this way:

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.

Men who referred to violence expressed that they felt 'anger' against their wives when, after men acquiesced to women's participation in a training program, the women failed to find gainful employment and were unable to provide support to the family. Many men explained that there had been much debate and argument in the house in order for the wife to convince the husband that she should participate in aid interventions - particularly when they entail income generation - as this could question the man's role as 'provider'. Economic necessity trumped all other concerns, and certain men agreed to let their wives leave the house. When the said trainings failed to yield significant economic support, these men felt that their wives were 'useless' (and also told their wives this) and that they were let out of the house 'for nothing'. This also bred resentment with the intervention itself, which was also labeled 'useless' and accused of using women to fill some kind of quota without offering substantive training. A man alluded to raised expectations that his wife would be able to support the family – yet she failed. The outcome generally seemed to be increased verbal and psychological violence. Women's self-esteem suffered as a result, and they felt less likely to take risks or make unconventional demands in the future. Many women articulated that they would feel more comfortable accessing their opportunities if men were not neglected.

With women also, most discussions about violence were implicit, but many were also able to refer to violence directly. Most of the discussions on violence centered around men's frustrations and inabilities to access opportunities. Women saw this as an explanation for the violence that was newly directed towards them. One elderly woman explained: "My husband didn't have good behavior during the Taliban regime. He was angry because he didn't have a job, so he left me forever". Another was more direct, stating that "men should stop abusing women because of their opportunities". She felt that her husband resented her ability to bring some an income, however meager, and that she would prefer that he work. Some women expressed this new violence as a result of men's 'insulted honor'. This married woman in her late 20s put it this way: "We don't want our men to be backed from any other man in the world. It is this that causes violence". She elaborated to explain that Afghan men are feeling dependent on others and as a result their dignity was under question. Both men and women expressed a strong desire for men to be able to stand on their own feet, without the support of others. Another woman reinforced this point, explaining that "men are more

aggressive and angry" because they lack employment. A few women were vocal in their blame of aid institutions and their focus on women. One said: "They increased violence between men and women and it will increase more". An Afghan woman elaborated: "The men, they have become more angry, more violent. Much more violent".

A few men, and many women, shared the view that violence against women has increased in the aftermath. Some felt that this is a continuation of wartime violence, such as this man from rural Afghanistan with no education who said: "Still men are the same. Most men are cruel to their wives and daughters. It might be a cause of the war". Another man blamed the enforced changes in gender relations for increased violence and hostility, explaining that "fundamentalist ideas have developed because many people feel that the changes happening with gender are obligatory and they are resisting them". Women from varied ages and backgrounds expressed more strongly worded concerns. Below are a few examples:

- I think that violence is increasing against women because men are angry.
- Apparently men and women's rights are equally distributed but still the violence against women has increased. This talk of rights has just increased the gap between men and women.
- Relations between men and women are getting worse because women are trying to have a new life and men don't want it.
- I think relations are not based on equality. Women are trying to gain power and men do not want to allow it.
- I think that women are fighting with men to secure their rights, and men are resisting the changes.
- Men and women's rights are not equal yet. Men are more aggressive and angry.
- Apparently men and women have equal rights - but violence against women has increased.

Most of the women interviewed did not refer to violence directly, but used other words such as anger, hostility, and tension. Some examples are:

- Some women's organizations have reflected wrong things about women, which has made men very angry.
- They do not support men directly. It makes the men angry.

- All bad things happen when men are not educated and literate.
- In some places, men have become sensitive about women's organizations. They believe that these organizations train women to stand against the laws and their husbands. Of course this is not true. It is actually what men think.
- Men know that they are not involved. And they are angry as a result.
- We want dignity for our men, and then they will treat us better.
- An imposed war has bad influence on men and women's relationship.
- Relations between men and women are getting worse because women are trying to have a new life and men don't want it.
- Relations seem good, but nothing is as it appears.
- Relations are changing and in many ways it is worse.

In Afghanistan, women are being increasingly castigated for being 'Western-influenced'. Strong pushes for women's rights run the risk of being undermined "because the impression of foreign heteronomy would be counterproductive" (Glatzer 2002). Fatana Gailani, longtime head of the Afghanistan Women's Council, told a story about her experience working to create a school for Afghan children in a refugee camp in Peshawar. Even the perspective that she might be working towards a 'Western' agenda could undermine her efforts and put her personal safety at risk. She said:

> *Some Mullahs, some fundamentalists made publicity in this camp. They said 'she is working for Western countries, she has a Western idea, and this and that', but I didn't have a Western idea, I had an Afghan idea. I am a Moslem, and I am an Afghan, I love my customs, I love my religion, and I was not using them in a wrong way.*
> (Ellis 2000: 192)

It is therefore important to recognize the role that aid interventions and their accompanying 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 result in a solution to the problem (Skjelsbæk, Barth et al. 2004). A leader of an aid institution for women suggested that the aid apparatus should work with Afghan women to help them recognize 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". Those interviewed noted a need for increased sensitivity to program design, and to promises made, as well as an increased understanding of the

impact a foreign presence might have in Afghanistan regarding violence against women. A member of Afghanistan's Judiciary and Justice Reform Commission explained why violence has increased:

> *We have another problem too. Now we are not in isolation from the world as we were 100 years ago. Now we have links with other parts of the world and the world looks at us, and it affects us. The effects had their influence on the way we wear clothes, and our livelihoods. We had a strong cultural background, but today Western culture is dominating our society day by day.*
> (Women and Children Legal Research Foundation 2004: 71)

Documented Cases

Afghan women's groups have expressed repeated concern about the increased levels of violence – both at the public and private levels. There has been a dramatic increase in violence against women at the time of this writing. 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"[188]. As a result, 300 women protested in Kabul[189]. Soon after, 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 for all Afghan citizens[190]. This further prompted plans for a protest and an email entitled *What you can do about the Backlash*, listing the following as one of the action items:

> *Contact your country representative/embassy in Afghanistan and ask for accountability on how your tax dollars are being spent in Afghanistan. No more empty rhetoric on 'national programs and policy' – what are the results on the ground?*[191]

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[188] This comes from a note that was left pinned to the women's bodies blaming their fate on their involvement with NGOs and its resulting "whoredom".
[189] For more information, see Kazem, H. (2005). Afghans Decry Violence Against Women. Los Angeles Times. Los Angeles: np.
[190] Security remains precarious in Afghanistan. Nearly every document, speech, and report on Afghanistan – by Afghan and non-Afghan 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.
[191] This email was sent to a select distribution list, of which I am a member, on 6 May 2005.

A few days afterwards, *Daily Outlook*, Afghanistan's English language newspaper, noted the increase in violence against women in several front-page articles (2005). On the following pages, there was an article about the Minister of Women's Affairs' work program, including support for widows and disabled women. She also expressed concern with the increase in domestic violence and the lack of mechanisms to bring perpetrators to court. The adjacent article reported a 16-year old girl who was raped and killed in Kabul. The *Kabul Weekly* – in English and Dari – ran several articles during that week also. The front page article stated that violence against women continues while the aid apparatus "looks on". A subheading of the article stated that the incident revealed "a village uncomfortable with outside interference" (2005).

A few months later, Afghanistan was shocked at the murder of Nadia Anjuman, a famed Afghan poet, by her husband[192]. She was 25 years old. According to friends and family, Anjuman was seen as a disgrace to her family due to her poetry, which described the oppression of Afghan women:

> *I am caged in this corner, full of melancholy and sorrow*
> *My wings are closed and I cannot fly*
> *I am an Afghan woman and I must wail*

Her death is cited as a "tragic example of the violence that so many Afghan women still face despite their advances four years after Taliban rule" (Gall 2005) and an indication that the Afghan government and the aid apparatus had failed to address issues of domestic violence. Anjuman's poem, *Soundless Cries*, is one of the few that is available in English in its entirety[193].

> *I hear the green paces of the rain*
> *Here they are coming*
> *A thirsty few who have come*
> *With their dusty outfits on*
> *With their breaths soiled with the*

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[192] Nadia Anjuman is famous for her book of poetry, *Gul-e-dodi* (Dark Red Flower) published in 2005. Very few of her poems are available in translation.
[193] Soundless Cries by Nadia Anjuman was translated by Abdul S. Shayek and can be found at http://www.pulpmovies.com/gagwatch/2005/11/lethal-poetry/

Deception of mirages
Paces, dry and dusty
They arrive here now
Girls, grown up with hurting soul
And wounded bodies
Happiness has escaped their faces
Hearts, old and cracked
The word of a smile never written
In the book of their lips
Not even a drop of tear can come out
The dried rivers of their eyes.
Oh dear God!
I do not know if their soundless cries
Reach the clouds, The skies?
I hear the green paces of the rain.

Conclusions

Researcher Jonathan Goodhand explains that we still know far too 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. Other research has documented men's sense of frustration with their inability to meet the household's basic needs and the violence that they mete out as a result. Research on urban vulnerability presents a good discussion of this issue. Stefan Schutte highlights this quote from a 35-year old man as an illustration of the negative impacts insufficient income have on intra-household relations:

> *When I had a job, everything was fine; we had good relations in our house. But it was only temporary, and now I am at home and everything gets on my nerves. I am not able to feed my family, and I am angry about that and then I am beating my wife, because she is complaining about that. What can I do? Give me a job, then everything will be good again.*
> (2004: 23)

Schutte explains that "accounts like these are frequent, and especially women report increasing domestic violence" (2004: 23). He elaborates that social assets have become vulnerable, and this in turn has put significant pressure on social relations. Poverty leads to domestic violence and deteriorating intra-household relations. This is more relevant for urban households as displacement has resulted in a lack of traditional social support systems in the form of extended families (Schutte 2004: 29-30).

Chapter IX addresses implications of ideological occupations and potential consequences. This chapter also reveals the ways in which an anti-politics framework can be viewed through a gender lens. The chapter concludes with the voices of Afghan women and men and their views of what the future holds, followed by avenues for possible future research.

CHAPTER IX: Insecurities, Ideological Occupations and Gender Anti-Politics in the Aftermath

The Dari word for transition, *gozargah*, represents a place people pass through, a point of transition, and an historic location in Kabul where nomads sought respite. Afghanistan's *gozargah* is neither the beginning of the journey nor the end.

Fairness, justice, and freedom are more than words – they are perspectives.
V for Vendetta

Jaggar writes that "the structure and context of [feminists'] discursive interventions may have the consequences of positioning the subjects of their discourse as less than equal. In these circumstances, discussion of some issues by some feminists may not only mute the voices of other women but even suggest that they are incapable of speaking for themselves" (1998: 11). This is an argument that reinforces the importance of highlighting Afghan voices, as has been done in this research. It is through my long experience in Afghanistan that this study can be validated. I am conscious of having been on 'both sides' with Afghan women's issues. I do not use this as an imposition of binary oppositions, but simply to mean that I have been both active participant and researcher in this context. Explanations of my position as well as discussions to close the feedback loop and verify findings can be found in Appendices 1 and 6.

1. Roles, Relations, and Opportunities

What Space Does Conflict Create?

There is a burgeoning literature on women's roles in conflict and its aftermath. In this context, an examination of the gender order is particularly relevant as Afghan society is undergoing processes of socio-political transformation, one result of which is the fluctuation of gender identities. Conflict compels individuals, households, and communities to fundamentally rethink and restructure their ways and beliefs. A part of this restructuring is played out on gender roles, and subsequently on gender relations. No consensus exists on whether these new gender roles are advantageous to women or sustainable in the long term. Despite new roles, opportunities, and responsibilities, women may easily be marginalized in the reconstruction process. Further, many theorists have argued that any expansion of women's

roles in war is only temporary and fails to sustain itself when the war ends (Pankhurst 1998). Conflict can stimulate a shift in gender roles while simultaneously provoking a retreat to conservative notions of masculinity and femininity (Meintjes, Pillay et al. 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 in NGOs or international agencies or even to start their own organizations, but I'm not sure to what extent it created opportunities outside the sphere of work – especially within the household where it seems the real power is.*

Aid interventions, particularly in the aftermath of conflict, are often conflated with radical social change. However, interventions that are implemented do not often challenge gender power relations, and even run the risk of doing a disservice to women by implementing programs and policies that have not taken all possible repercussions into account[194]. Aid interventions aiming to empower women may in fact place women at increased risk. This is particularly relevant in the case of Afghanistan, where the rhetoric used to justify aid interventions stemmed from the language used to justify the ousting of the Taliban – a military intervention. And yet, nearly five years later, one could argue that Afghan women are neither 'liberated' nor 'empowered'. Interventions that raise expectations of empowerment encourage women to step outside pre-existing gender roles. In so doing, gender and power relations are challenged. Women face greater risk if the environment for social change is seen to be an external imposition. Amnesty International notes the "cautious and precarious atmosphere under which the issue of advancing women's rights is currently debated" (2005). Women may suffer further when gender-focused interventions fail to take gender issues into account, focusing only on women. As seen from the research presented above, men's perceptions that they are neglected could result in a backlash for women. Social change and transformation are not simply introduced by aid interventions, but are longer-term processes operating at a structural level to address gender inequalities - on women's own terms. Such processes are contextual and local, raising doubts as to whether an international aid-imposed social change agenda is really the right approach (Amnesty International 2005).

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[194] For further information, see Abirafeh, L. (2005). "From Afghanistan to Sudan: How Peace Risks Marginalizing Women." Forced Migration Review(November 2005).

Afghan women felt that they were not sufficiently consulted on the direction and pace of social change. This demonstrates a denial women's agency and in their ability to act on their own behalf and achieve gains. Theorists have elaborated on this point, arguing that the possibility of a backlash against women confirms that aid interventions should be designed by women participants. Empowerment is not a technical tool that can be handed to women. Instead, it must be generated by the women it is meant to serve (Pickup, Williams et al. 2001). It is crucial to support and advocate a contextualized approach that recognizes Afghan history and Afghan pace and patterns of social change. To this end, interventions must aim to understand concepts of gender and empowerment and the construction of gender roles and relations in local contexts. This entails congruence with Islam and other social frameworks within which Afghans chose to operate. Interventions should be further cognizant of the images used and the resulting perceptions that emerge. The perception of an imposed Western agenda coupled with the image of Afghan women as downtrodden creatures beneath *chaddaris* does little to advance the cause of Afghan women, particularly in the context of the Western world's current climate of fear/fascination with women in Islam. Women's rights activists advise caution in order to avoid backlash from the conservative elements of Afghan society.

Shifts in the gender order are largely indigenous, yet they can be supported or hindered by external interventions. 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... 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. Aid interventions in the context of conflict and the aftermath may create additional dependency and a loss of control over one's life and future (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children 2005). While women may benefit from the increased emphasis placed on them by aid institutions, men tend to feel emasculated as a result. Failing to take gender dynamics into consideration could result in increased inequalities, as respondents have frequently stated. This perspective is reinforced by studies that show that ignoring the needs of men and focusing exclusively on women's participation can create additional challenges such as male resistance, token female participation, and the continuation of male domination (Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children 2005).

Aid interventions that do not take gender dimensions into account may be exacerbating violence against women. Domestic violence - and even the fear of violence – is a key factor in limiting women's participation in aid interventions (Pickup, Williams et al. 2001). In fact, women are well aware that their active involvement in aid interventions may present challenges to men's roles. There may be tensions if women's newly-assumed roles are not viewed in line with traditional social structures. This backlash could return women to their pre-war roles, or perhaps leave women worse off than they were before the war. It is not unusual to witness a return to, or even an increase in, patriarchal control over women (Pickup, Williams et al. 2001). Even if gender *roles* change in conflict, gender *relations* may not change (Bouta, Frerks et al. 2005: 55, from El-Bushra et al. 2002). However, it is possible to emphasize women's centrality to reconstruction efforts and aid interventions without marginalizing men. Working with men in gender programming as participants and as advocates and supporters could help change male perceptions of women and help to overcome practices which restrict women's rights. This is integral to combating violence against women and to pushing the progression of engagement with men to the fifth phase – working with men in their own right. An Afghan woman explained that "when society is ready [for changes]... the women will ask it by themselves" (Amnesty International 2005).

2. Interventions, Implications, and Occupations

Now, more than a decade later, the US and its allies wanted to sort out Afghanistan. They had defined a problem, and now they were setting out to solve it, on their own terms.
(Shah 2003: 293)

It is as if there is an invisible corrective to the West in Afghanistan, a force of nature, dragging it back to its roots.
(Shah 2003: 200)

Understanding Context

> *Again and again throughout the country's history, the Afghan people have shown that they are against any kind of imported culture. It was clear that if women's rights were to be widely accepted and realized, they must not be perceived as imposed by foreign interests.*
> (Mosadiq 2005: 30)

Thus, the 'gender agenda' in Afghanistan is lost in a desert of sorts, as mentioned in Chapter V. It is desert that lacks context and lacks history. It is a desert that failed to recognize what Afghan history aptly demonstrates, namely the deep and pervasive nature of the dislike of foreign intervention. In fact, even the perception that an initiative is foreign-driven could likely result in its failure. Furthermore, women may jeopardize their own safety and standing in the community by linking themselves with foreigners. Even the perception that an Afghan woman is promoting a foreign agenda could lead to the believe that she is "contaminated by [her] association with outsiders" (Dupree 1996: 6). In associating with foreigners, it is believed that she has betrayed the trust of the community and thereby undermined her own – and men's – honor.

Afghan history has also demonstrated that the most powerful means by which to destabilize agendas for social change is to label them un-Islamic. Understandings of Afghan socio-cultural contexts inevitably entail recognition of the value and significance of religion in the lives of Afghans. Every Afghan interviewed – woman or man – highlighted the importance of achieving gains within the context of Islam. Among discussions with non-Afghan policy-makers and policy implementers, the importance of Islam was often overlooked. Many Afghan members of aid institutions, in the words of one Afghan woman NGO leader, urged that interventions "should do everything with respect to Afghan and Islamic culture". Despite Islam's contested interpretations, it is vital to the functioning of Afghan society and reflects 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.

Researchers have noted a cultural dissonance between changes within Afghan contexts and the values advocated by Western aid (Barakat and Wardell 2004: 110-1). For example, 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 contexts of their traditions and religion. Many of those interviewed, particularly Afghan women, expressed strong sentiments against using radical language and tactics for fear of a backlash. This also includes adopting a seemingly-Western approach to working with women. Another Afghan woman with an aid institution advocated that "gender experts should follow a gender perspective in Afghanistan through Afghan eyes. This means taking into consideration the prevailing customs and traditions".

An understanding of Afghan history, as previously illustrated, demonstrates that backlashes are not new to Afghan history. "Whenever attempts have been made to force the issue of women's rights in Afghanistan this has resulted in a violent backlash, often with disastrous consequences for women themselves" (Barakat 2004: 128). In fact, "the lessons of previous attempts to fast-track social change in Afghanistan seem to have been forgotten" (Johnson and Leslie 2004: 25). 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 interventions that complement women's realities.

An interview with an Afghan woman named Zohra in the book *Women of Afghanistan Under the Taliban* expressed the sentiments of many:

> *Of what I have read in history... and what I have experienced in 46 years of my life, one thing has been confirmed to be right, that if there is foreign handling of our affairs, our people will never see a progressing Afghanistan. And I must say that our people throughout history have proved their opposition to the foreigner and never have accepted any kind of slavery. I have a piece of advice for US, Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia that before taking any decision on Afghanistan, spend a few minutes and flick through the pages of Afghanistan's history, I am sure they would find some useful materials. The 20 years of wars have struck our innocent nation severe blows that they are incapable to speak out against the external and internal aggressors, but a time will come when our people will stand on their feet and sweep out the enemies of Afghanistan.*
> (Skaine 2002: 102)

An Afghan woman working as a policy implementer with an aid institution expressed strong sentiments about the push to import and impose foreign concepts in Afghanistan, as history has demonstrated the repeated failure of this strategy:

I do not need to remind you that imposing an idea on Afghans is impossible. You know this. To bring positive change, the idea should be fixed in an Afghan cultural framework. Gender is the most valid example of this. We should have started by focusing on men because they are the ones traditionally with more power. When men understand the meaning of gender and its importance – and how it benefits them – women will immediately gain what they deserve. But we have not yet learned from history and we still try to do things the wrong way. Backwards.

A New Occupation of Afghanistan

Norman Long explains a 'domain' as a concept that illuminates areas of social life organized by reference to a central core of values which are recognized as a locus of certain social 'rules' and imply a degree of social commitment, similar to the definition I have used for an institution (2000: 191). Long's domains present an understanding of social ordering in a particular context and explain a situation where differing domains come into conflict. Such is the point of 'interface'. Long might agree that a point of interface is underway in Afghanistan. This interface is one that has played out repeatedly in Afghan history, that between a foreign 'occupier' and Afghans in Afghanistan.

It is problematic to note the trend emerging from data that parallels the 'regime' of the aid apparatus to previous occupiers in Afghanistan's history[195]. Again, this is not new. Aid has long been a means by which outsiders gain influence in Afghanistan (Johnson and Leslie 2004: 95)[196]. "What the West has underestimated is the degree to which our interventions look to many Afghans like history repeating itself. Another foreign invasion... It's not a matter of reality... but of perception" (Hensher 2006). Indeed, it is the perception that is the most important aspect of this scenario, and one that the aid apparatus repeatedly neglects. Researchers Magnus and Naby explained it this way in 1998:

With family and community being as coherent and cohesive as they are in Afghan society, historical memory... plays an important role in the perceptions of people and

[195] This is not exclusive to Afghanistan. Jaggar notes that "some argue that Northern-funded NGOs are a new form of colonialism, despite using the language of inclusion, empowerment, accountability and grass-roots democracy", because they undermine local efforts to assist people. Jaggar, A. M. (2004). "Saving Amina" Global Justice for Women and Intercultural Dialogue, University of Colorado at Boulder.

[196] For example, in the 1980s, aid to Afghanistan was tied to Cold War alliances, and in the mid-1990s the agenda switched to promote peace. For more information, see Johnson, C. and J. Leslie (2004). Afghanistan: The Mirage of Peace. London, Zed Books.

> *in their concept of their identity. An evaluation of [Afghanistan's legacy of imperialism] can help to explain the attitudes of Afghans toward foreigners... and why Afghans are both susceptible and resistant to outside interference.*
> (1998: 50)

Nearly ten years earlier, Dupree wrote of Afghans' apprehensions about what they were calling 'cultural imperialism'. She wrote of Afghans' sense that "outsiders, no matter how well-intentioned, sit poised, ready to engulf the nation with new sets of foreign values" (1990: 131). It is said that the one thing that repeatedly unites a very divisive Afghanistan is the need to drive out occupiers.

This opposition to 'cultural imperialism' is voiced most strongly when it relates to women. Specifically, it is assumed that the corruption and degradation of Afghan women is a fundamental part of the Western 'cultural imperialism' agenda (Weiner and Banuazizi 1994: 24-5). This sentiment resonates with other countries. Cockburn's work on the gender order in Cyprus revealed that foreign occupation of a country actually fueled gender divisions (2004). In the 1960s, Cyprus under British occupation was a traditional society with a gender line strongly dividing public (male) and private (female) space. During this time, notions of honor – linked to women – emerged as strong social forces that further delineated space. Return to 'tradition' was expected: "In societies that are most opposed to Western capitalist cultural and consumer imperialism, one aspect of resistance is often the reinforcement of traditional gender dichotomy and hierarchy" (2004: 30). In Purna Sen's words:

> *All should be promising and optimistic for women but it is not so. No, it is not only the troubled process of transition that brings women continued problems but the 'freedom' and liberties of the western systems themselves.*
> (2002: 13)

This freedom manifests itself in the form of parties, pornography, and alcohol – a direct onslaught on Afghan values (Johnson and Leslie 2004: 25). This can be demonstrated by the 'no Afghan' door policy in Kabul restaurants that serve alcohol – or the myriad brothels masquerading as restaurants. These recreational activities appear – to Afghans – to be an attack against their *Afghaniyat*, or sense of Afghan identity. Indeed, this ideological occupation has taken the form of perceived imposition of an alien culture. This imposition,

coupled with the lack of meaningful changes in the lives of Afghans, has resulted in Afghans adopting more conservative views (Rostami-Povey 2007).

The present day project of perceived cultural imperialism is one that stems from experiments in social engineering led by the aid apparatus (Giles and Hyndman 2004; Dorronsoro 2005). At several periods of interface in Afghanistan's history, the hostility toward this project was led by those largely in rural areas against a government or military apparatus. The current interface is now also experiencing open clashes in urban areas. Rostami-Povey explains that the failure of development efforts and women's rights is not simply due to a contradiction between modernity and tradition. It is in fact a widening of the gap between the urban elite and the rural majority (2007: 19).

This is, firstly, because the aid apparatus is centered in urban areas. And, even more noteworthy, the rural population has been displaced to the cities. The old urban elite, those who applauded strong pushes for social change in the past, have since largely left Afghanistan. The population of Kabul is predominantly comprised of Afghans of rural origins. Once a liberal urban center, Kabul has become a site of violence in the supposed aftermath - and therefore an interface where a more rigid gender order is enforced.

In the recent increase of violence, many have documented the Afghan perception of their 'occupation'[197]. Former Afghan president Professor Burhanuddin Rabbani[198] has become an outspoken critic of Western 'cultural imperialism', arguing that it has come to corrupt Islam and obstruct Afghanistan's development as an independent country. He put his views this way:

> *We consider this a conspiracy against our religion, our freedom and security. They talk about women's issues, while thousands of women die, and nobody cares for them. But that does not stop them from talking about 'moral corruption'. They haven't come here for the reconstruction of Afghanistan, but they have come here to corrupt us ...The regime that rules our country stands against the wishes of the entire nation ... In Afghanistan, our policies should be defined by our nation, not by any foreign country. The current Afghan government's policies are not acceptable to*

[197] For one example, see Burke, J. (2006, 25 June). "Fear Battles Hope on the Road to Kandahar." Guardian Unlimited Retrieved 25 June 2006, http://observer.guardian.co.uk/world/story/0,,1805334,00.html.
[198] Rabbani is a Tajik leader who founded Jamiat-i-Islami as an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood in the late 1960s and played a key role in the Afghan *jihad*, or holy war.

the Afghan people. We must protect our freedom. If a foreign country gives aid, that should be without any strings attached. If the donors put conditions, we should not accept such aid.
(Bhadrakumar 2006)

His influence over Afghan public opinion should not be underestimated, nor should his understanding of it. Rabbani's thoughts might appear to be provocative, but his words speak for many in Afghanistan. In May 2005, an article in *Kabul Weekly* - a paper written in English and Dari by Afghan authors – also reinforced this point. It is relevant that the authors were Afghan and the text was English because the messages conveyed were geared to the aid apparatus. The article *NGO-Union founded to create self-sustainability: NGOs in Afghanistan take a step towards ending reliance on international funds* in that same edition told the story of Afghan NGOs wanting to dictate their own agenda and end their "dependence". The subheading read: "Afghan NGOs seeking to rid themselves of international funds" and elaborated that foreign organizations are "attempting to project the values and norms of foreign civil societies on Afghanistan... [bringing] negative results". The article also stated that "experts believe that NGOs' activities are not useful unless they find national financial sources and organize their programs according to the priorities of the nation's needs". One Afghan NGO-Union member said: "Their meetings and activities are commanded by foreigners, who are of no use to Afghanistan". He continued to say that NGOs should be free of foreign donors so that they can be allowed to implement projects in line with the values of Afghanistan; "Only then can they release themselves from the bondage of strangers" (2005).

The significance of the Afghan perception of being occupied by yet another regime cannot be overstated. It is expressed most clearly in this *Open Letter to Expatriates in Afghanistan*, written by Sanjar Qiam and posted on various websites and distribution lists[199]. Segments of this letter follow:

The historical irony of this phenomenon never ceases to amaze me. Both post and pre Taliban eras are marked by oligarchic order: warlordism rooted out whatever was left of state infrastructure and committed all sorts of atrocities. The post Taliban period is marked by Expatlordism - a new type of oligarchy... There is an increasing

[199] For the full text, see http://sanjar.blogspot.com/2006/07/open-letter-to-expatriates-in.html

concentration of the means of communication at the top, this is due to communication culture, instruments, language and tendencies in foreign organization... Organizational oligarchy has brought about societal oligarchy. Just like everything else a society can absorb certain dose of foreigners over a certain period of time. Afghanistan can take a very small dosage of foreigners as they are allergic to them. Every page of history witnesses the low 'absorption capacity' - if I may borrow the term from EU... I am making a reference to the history of a proud and individualistic man who defends his way of life... My point is for one reason or another we are all protective. Except the difference is in your network everyone should play by your rules, which is fine. But you play by your rules in my network too. You don't have the faintest idea of my network and you even don't try to acquire some. You never think of shifting your stand, and redesigning your aims and your way of work. You tend to make Afghanistan feel like home. But Afghanistan is not your home. The more you try to live `your life' the more Afghans would hate you.
Yours truly, Sanjar

Continued Insecurities

On 24 June 2006, BBC aired a special report entitled "Afghanistan: Losing the Aid Game". This report was quite timely as it coincided firstly with the writing of this dissertation and, more importantly, took place within a discouraging political climate in Afghanistan where frustrations and disillusionment appeared to be the order of the day. This report was aired a few short weeks after the riots in Kabul, the worst demonstration of violence in so-called post-conflict Afghanistan since the ousting of the Taliban in late 2001.

On 29 May 2006, riots erupted in Kabul, ignited by a traffic accident between Afghan vehicles and a US military convoy, leaving over 14 people dead and nearly 150 injured. A volcanic reservoir of discontent overflowed into the city, directed at those who – in principle – are in Afghanistan to help. Myriad news articles reported on the sense of frustration felt by Afghans at the lack of progress in their country. "Underlying it all is the fact that young men have not seen any tangible change in their lives in terms of either jobs or basic services," explained a British aid worker (Morarjee 2006). Another article quoted an Afghan security officer who said: "Many people hate the NGOs because they see all this money coming into the country and they have not been able to get jobs. They were waiting for a day like today" (Morarjee 2006).

These riots followed the killing of four Afghan aid workers with an international NGO in Jawzjan Province (Morarjee 2006). 2006 has proved to be an exceptionally brutal year for aid workers in Afghanistan. Human Rights Watch presents a comparison of aid workers killed since 2003:

12 aid workers killed in 2003
24 aid workers killed in 2004
31 aid workers killed in 2005
24 aid workers killed from 1 January to 20 June 2006
(Human Rights Watch 2006: 18)

The sense among the aid apparatus is that the situation will continue to deteriorate. Many have speculated that Afghanistan will once again be plunged into war by the end of the year[200]. BBC seemingly concurs. A June 2006 report stated that "international development is failing one of its biggest challenges" in Afghanistan (Loyn 2006). The producer, BBC's Developing World Correspondent, David Loyn, reported that the people are disillusioned with the government and the aid apparatus, and that, as a result, "a return to war is still a possibility". Afghanistan's semblance of freedom is fragile, the report explains. Loyn lined up an array of reputable guests to address the discrepancy between so-called peace and the absence of prosperity in Afghanistan. One of these guests was Ramazan Bashardost, the infamous former Minister of Planning whose critique of 'NGO-ism' was previously discussed. Bashardost referred to the aid apparatus as a mafia who have "killed a golden and historic chance to foster cooperation between a Muslim country and a Western country" (2006). Loyn added that while the aid apparatus may have had good intentions, "it's often more difficult to do things on the ground than on paper" (2006).

Ashraf Ghani, the former Minister of Finance and outspoken critic of the aid apparatus, said that Afghanistan was in fact undermined by aid interventions, citing the absence of action despite the abundance of consultants as a case in point. The report demonstrated that in many parts of Afghanistan, the conditions are so poor it appears "as if an emergency had just hit" (2006). One would never believe that Afghanistan is nearly five years into so-called 'post-conflict'. Loyn concluded that Afghanistan is an example of what he called "the law

[200] This is based on myriad discussions on 'the situation in Afghanistan' that increasingly dominate any gathering of aid workers in 2006.

of unintended consequences", and yet the country could have been a positive example of what a concerted international effort can accomplish (2006).

In a personal email communication from a friend and colleague following the riots and reports, she wrote:

> *There are reports circulating on internet groups of the anger amongst Kabulis when they hear and see international lavish parties and self-congratulatory news of their contribution to the development effort when the city and the country as a whole is still teeming with a half-starved, ill serviced, growing population*[201].

Education is likely the sector that received the most kudos in Afghanistan's aftermath. It was widely believed that great progress was made, but the below example suggests that any perceived successes would be premature.

Shabnam: Increased Insecurity in Education

> *This is to warn all the teachers and those employees who work with Companies to stop working with them. We have warned you earlier and this time we give you a three days ultimatum to stop working. If you do not stop, you are to blame yourself.*
> Taliban *Shabnam*, or Night Letters, from Zabul
> (Human Rights Watch 2006: 50)

This brief example of the deleterious impact of insecurity on the education sector provides a strong diagnostic indicator of the costs of insecurity more generally (Human Rights Watch 2006: 5). Historically, schools in Afghanistan have been at the frontline of hostilities that are directed at the central government and at perceived foreign interference.

> *The Afghan government and the international community have not developed adequate policy responses to the impact of increasing insecurity on development in general, and education in particular – a particularly sensitive topic because education is often touted as one of the major successes of the post-Taliban government in Afghanistan.*
> (2006: 11)

[201] Personal email communication, June 2006.

In the Human Rights Watch report *Attacks on Education in Afghanistan*, research was conducted on violence and threats against the education sector. 110 attacks against schools, teachers, and students have taken place between 1 January and 21 June 2006 (2006: 125). Many of these involved girls' schools. One NGO worker had the following to say:

> *We always have to be careful when we do women's activities... [so that] women are not targeted... Something that can take a month may take us four to five months because we have to be so careful. This makes us look bad to someone in Washington... But it is the insurgency that hampers us from moving faster.*
> (2006: 79)

Fear of violence has a profound effect on women both because they are targeted for violence and because of the stigma they face if they are victims. Groups opposed to girls' education have used threats of violence as a deterrent, keeping an increasing number of girls out of school every year. The forces against girls' education are stronger than the communities' will to resist them. A member of a women's group in Kandahar explained it this way: "Culture is an issue, [but] security is more important because even those people who want to break tradition are not able to" (2006: 98).

Shabnam, or Night Letters, are threatening letters left in public places or on the doors of individual homes at night. This tactic was frequently employed during the parliamentary elections to intimidate female candidates. *Shabnam* frequently make the case that those Afghans who are 'associating with infidels' are thereby 'betraying' Islam and Afghan culture and will be punished:

> *Muslim Brothers: Understand that the person who helps launch an attack with infidels is no longer a member of the Muslim community. Therefore, punishment of those who cooperate with infidels is the same as the [punishment of] infidels themselves. You should not cooperate in any way – neither with words, nor with money nor with your efforts. Watch out not to exchange your honor and courage for power and dollar.*
> Taliban *Shabnam* from Helmand
> (2006: 46)

Back to the Beginning

To conclude, it is worthwhile going back to 'the beginning' to gauge progress. The following excerpt was written in March 2003, in the relatively early days of Afghanistan's aftermath. During this time, there was hope that Afghanistan – and the much-touted cause of Afghan women – was on the path to victory. Since the writing of this piece, the situation in Afghanistan has suffered myriad evasions and rewritings, so much that the original aim has been lost in a haze of rhetoric. "The world's attention turned elsewhere, and Afghanistan, we were told, was now OK" (Hensher 2006). Perhaps the following passage on women will serve as a good measure to judge how "OK" Afghanistan really is:

> *Sustainable gender mainstreaming must recognize that Afghan women cannot be disaggregated from the communities in which they live. Past attempts at legal and institutional reform... failed in part because they did not enjoy a base of community support; they drew instead on poorly understood models that were not adapted to the political and social realities of Afghanistan. There is a risk that today's reform will prove equally ephemeral. The international community's approach to gender has been guided not so much by Afghan history and its own accumulated experience in community development, but by a desire for immediate, visible signs of progress in woman's* [sic] *education and economic empowerment.*
> (International Crisis Group 2003: 23)

I argued at the beginning of this writing that Afghan women have been wrongly used as the barometer to measure social change in Afghanistan. However, as this case of Afghan women has demonstrated, the relative 'success' or 'failure' of 'the situation of Afghan women' can surely be a barometer to measure the 'success' or 'failure' of the aid apparatus in Afghanistan. Indeed, the 'rights agenda' – most directly applied to Afghan women – "will be one of the main parameters by which international donors and the Afghan people will assess developments in Afghanistan" (UNDP and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2004: 152). If the rights agenda is indeed the benchmark, what could be said about present-day developments in Afghanistan?

This research should not be taken as a judgment on whether a particular type of intervention has succeeded or failed. Success or failure is really not the point. Even a failed intervention, as Ferguson explained, can accomplish a strategic task (1994). This attempt at a political

task - restructuring the gender order - through a technical aid intervention has actually served to destabilize the gender order as the complexities of this task have been underestimated. The current gender order in Afghanistan is therefore far from settled as Afghan men perceive a challenge to their institutionalized patriarchy through aid institutions. These institutions come in good faith but with a flawed understanding, and an inability to see indigenous challenges to the gender order that were already underway. As one effect, violence against women has appeared as the mechanism by which the gender order is defended when it is challenged. This study has attempted to place anti-politics in a gender framework to illustrate the above points.

It is important, however, to place this particular analysis in the context of increased violence and conflict, and a deteriorating situation. The existing measures of countries-in-conflict confirm this. For instance, the World Bank uses a nine-point checklist to indicate countries that could be approaching conflict:

1. Violent conflict in the past ten years
2. Low per capita GNI
3. High dependence on primary commodities exports
4. Political instability, including transformation of the state structure and a breakdown in law and order
5. Restricted civil and political rights
6. Militarization
7. Ethnic dominance
8. Active regional conflicts
9. High youth unemployment

(2002: 2)

One might argue that present-day Afghanistan qualifies for all of these points. To balance this, the UNDP Human Development Report lists seven elements that are necessary for long-term human security and a sustainable development process in Afghanistan:

1. Security and safety
2. A responsible state and an accountable state-building process
3. Inclusive and empowering institutions and policies
4. Genuine participation

5. Balanced development (specifically in terms of focusing equally on rural areas and ensuring women's participation)
6. A supportive international community
7. Peaceful and cooperative regional agendas

(2004: 228-236)

One might further argue that given the recent escalation of violence, the inability of the central government to exercise authority over many provinces, the continued marginalization of Afghan civil society groups, the further deterioration of social indicators in rural areas, the decreased funding and focus from the aid apparatus, the continued tensions with Pakistan, and the possible increase of violence against women, Afghanistan in fact meets all of the World Bank's conflict indicators and none of the UNDP's elements of success. How Afghanistan will fare in the future remains to be seen.

3. The Personal is Still Political[202]

It is worthwhile restating what has been emphasized throughout this work and myriad others. Mariam Nawabi, an Afghan lawyer and leader, put it this way:

> *Throughout Afghanistan's history, women's... rights have reflected internal and external tensions. Various political groups have used the issue of women's rights to criticize other groups and to rally support for their ideologies. The issue of women's rights in Afghanistan has also been linked to attempts by foreign nations to interfere in Afghan politics. History in Afghanistan has taught that when foreign intervention or influences are seen as the catalyst for reform in women's rights, rather than allowing the reforms to grow from within, the changes are not long-lasting. Conservatives and traditionalists inevitably use the issue of women's rights to link the ruling government with foreign interests or to accuse the government of running counter to Afghan culture or tribal customs. These accusations are then used to build popular support against the government and its reforms. In many cases, these foreign interests have been successful in hampering developments in women's rights... If the issue of women's rights is regarded solely as an agenda to appease pro-Western influences,*

[202] 'The Personal is Political' is a feminist approbation of an anarchist notion to democratize everyday life. The underlying concept is that power inequalities are rooted in social structures and therefore changing the institutions that shape personal life is a form of political activism. Jaggar, A. M. (2005). "Arenas of Citizenship: Civil Society, State and the Global Order." International Feminist Journal of Politics 7(1).

conservative groups are likely to use the issue to build popular support against the government that brings about such changes.
(2003: 7)

The idea of a brewing backlash and negative effects for women is therefore not a secret. Even the UN has articulated their concern, stating that Afghan history repeatedly demonstrates that "efforts to strengthen women's status inherently carry the danger of a backlash" (2004: 18).

In a discussion of the failure of redistributive reforms in Soviet-occupied Afghanistan, Barnett Rubin, a leading authority on Afghanistan, cites four lines of argument that could easily be applied to present-day attempts to restructure the gender order:

1. *The reforms failed because the reformers had insufficient knowledge of the society they were trying to reform.*
2. *The Afghan state did not have the capacity to carry out the reforms.*
3. *According to the government itself, external intervention deprived it of the chance to correct its "mistakes".*
4. *Finally... the reforms failed because the government that carried them out lacked legitimacy.*
(1994: 216-7)

These four lines of argument fit well with the four presuppositions with which I began this discussion. Indeed, Rubin's analysis confirms that a robust understanding of the Afghan context is lacking. For these purposes, it is therefore likely that policy formulation reflected a discourse on women that was not socially and historically contextualized. Rubin continues to address issues of capacity. This is relevant to aid institutions because their intent, based on policy, was to transform women's position, yet the discourse on transformation denied women's agency. In short, meeting political concerns with technical responses does put capacity into question. Rubin further states that external intervention debilitated the Afghan government from implementing policies. In this case, the technical nature of implementation would contribute to achieving the stated goal of transformation. Thus the aid apparatus in fact debilitated itself. This is linked to Rubin's fourth point, that the apparatus lacked legitimacy. In fact, it continuously fed its lack of legitimacy, leaving Afghans with little belief that the aid apparatus can actually achieve the political project it set out for itself. Finally, to

extend Rubin's argument one step further, I have argued that the combination of these lines of argument has produced significant unintended effects, including increased violence against women – a direct counter to the one vociferous goal the apparatus set for itself.

Extending Ferguson's anti-politics framework to gender-focused aid interventions in Afghanistan might further illuminate Rubin's lines of argument. Ferguson might argue that the aid apparatus portrayed Afghan women as eager candidates for the political project of 'liberation' – manifesting itself in the rights and empowerment discourse. Yet, the aid apparatus was not equipped to take on this political project, so they responded in the ways that they were able – through a standardized package of technical responses. In so doing, however, the aid apparatus further fueled the political game within which they found themselves. It is not possible to de-politicize women in Afghanistan – the most dangerously political project of all. The aid apparatus naively believed that advancing the 'gender agenda' would be a 'safe' issue (who can say no to a little women's liberation, after all?) and a guaranteed success. But if 'success' is measured by the perceptions of those who are its supposed 'beneficiaries', the evidence is less clear. Ferguson puts it this way, illuminating:

> *... the fundamental contradiction in the role "development agencies" are intended to play. On the one hand, they are supposed to bring about "social change", sometimes of a dramatic and far-reaching sort. At the same time, they are not supposed to "get involved in politics" – and in fact have a strong de-politicizing function. But any real effort at "social change" cannot help but have powerful political implications, which a "development project" is constitutionally unfit to deal with. To do what it is set up to do (bring about socio-economic transformations), a "development" project must attempt what it is set up not to be able to do (involve itself in political struggles).*
> (1994: 226)

Indeed, as Walby aptly stated, "the 'personal' is as political as ever" (1997: 196) – and perhaps even more so when it comes to gender issues in Afghanistan. Both Ferguson and Jaggar would agree, advocating for a reconnection between personal and political. Kandiyoti sees this as a struggle to raise consciousness. Monlyneux grounds it in an identification of needs and interests. I see a link between an Afghan feminism and a contextualized politics presenting opportunities for advancement rooted in human rights and gender justice. But this has not been the path taken.

Afghan history demonstrates that externally enforced social reforms have been resisted time and again, "leading to vacillations between periods of relative progress, on the one hand, and of retrenchment, if not reversal, on the other" (Weiner and Banuazizi 1994: 24). Attempts at engineering a social transformation will continue to have serious repercussions for women as long as their agency is denied in the process. Gender policies do not operate in a socio-political vacuum. Such interventions "are more likely to repeat history if they do not effectively reflect on that history" (Goodhand and Cramer 2002: 904). Lessons can also be learned from other countries in conflict and the aftermath. Kandiyoti argues that women's increasingly restricted mobility in Iraq is a reflection of deteriorating security coupled with a backlash against occupying forces. She articulates that the external promotion of the women's rights agenda is serving to undermine local women and their organizations (2007: 195-6). The same argument can be made for Afghanistan.

Kandiyoti's views on Iraq reinforce my argument about Afghanistan. In short, the political vision of a transformation agenda has been stripped of its political significance and as a result has been neutralized, if not excised (Molyneux 2007: 234). The aid apparatus attempted to depoliticized what is likely the most political discourse of all in Afghanistan – women. Such an excision cannot but have political ramifications. Further, according to Afghan perceptions, it might appear that the aid apparatus took 'sides' in its restructuring of the gender order – with women, and therefore against men. The significance of these perceptions should not be overlooked. While the aid apparatus presented the 'liberation' of women as a 'rights' issue without political context or consequences, Afghans saw this as an entirely political action, with entirely political effects. Ferguson concluded his research by asking if the concept of anti-politics is transferable. The Afghan example is a case in point, demonstrating that there are side effects from an attempt to engineer social transformation. Neglect of the politicization of the 'women issue' has only served to feed the political fire. And women are increasingly burned by those flames.

Freedom for Women: Only Words

One year after the fall of the Taliban, *Malalai*[203], the women's magazine, asked what has changed for Afghan women one year on. The lead article, entitled *Freedom for Women: Only Words* argued that "the freedom which now exists for women is a freedom with little meaning" (Mujahed 2002: 2). The author and editor, Jamila Mujahed, a prominent Afghan woman leader, explained that women were expecting greater changes in this first year of so-called freedom. And yet, despite promises and rhetoric, there are few changes. "This flame of hope has been kept alive... [though] endless speeches about the tragic lives of women and the importance of paying attention to them", but maybe those speakers have "too many things to do" and perhaps they do not care enough to make good on their promises, Mujahed argued (2002: 2). As a concluding thought, she states: "We do not need this slow and essentially positive process disrupted" (2002: 2). What would Jamila Mujahed - or any of the Afghan women who have dedicated their lives to this cause – say now? This sentiment of frustration has only increased since this article was written in November 2002. Afghan women and men alike are increasingly disillusioned with the reconstruction process and believe that it is indeed 'only words'.

"We need more than words", I wrote in a statement on International Women's Day (8 March) in 2003, issued by a consortium of women's NGOs in Afghanistan, led by the Afghan Women's Resource Center (AWRC)[204], the Afghan Women's Network (AWN)[205] and Women for Women International – Afghanistan:

> *We must follow through with action. But we must also be prepared to be patient. This will not be a "quick impact project". What is needed is social evolution. Just a glance at the history of Afghanistan shows that rapid social change has resulted in serious consequences. Efforts to improve women's lives will be worthwhile in the long term if we remain sensitive to the culture and history of the country and if we operate with a clear sense of where Afghan women themselves want their future to be. Essential to*

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[203] The magazine is named after the famed heroine Malalai, who is known for securing an Afghan victory in the Battle of Maiwand in 1880 during the second Ango-Afghan war. Malalai used her veil as a banner to encourage Afghan soldiers. Her name has become part of Afghan legend and is used for many schools, hospitals, and so on.
[204] AWRC's mission is to empower the most vulnerable women through providing them with opportunities to access education, skills training, health services and employment, in a culturally appropriate environment, to enable them to become active, self-esteemed and self-reliant members of their families and society.
[205] The Afghan Women's Network is a non-partisan network of over 1200 women and 30 women's NGOs. It provides capacity building and advocacy for its members and encourages collaboration and coordination between its members.

starting this process is recognition and awareness that women are essential to the rebuilding of Afghanistan and should be given an active role in all development efforts. Women across Afghanistan want to participate meaningfully in the reconstruction of their community.
(2003)

Possible Avenues for Future Research

A Deeper Understanding of Social Roles

In a paper on gender in urban governance, Beall wrote: "The challenge will be met when the complexity of women and men's social roles is recognized and their involvement in the control of their everyday lives is welcomed" (1996: 2). There is still much research that can be done on Afghan men and women's social roles, including a collection of longitudinal data over time and across generations. There is also a generation gap that is making itself more apparent in Afghanistan, coupled with the dynamic of the refugee experience. The older generation is of late being met with a younger generation who has spent time across Afghanistan's borders and is bringing new ideas into Afghanistan. The social dynamics between a displaced generation and those who have spent time in Pakistan, Iran, or even farther, could produce a deeper understanding of the multiple social fissures in Afghanistan and how these might play out in the future. Further, Walby advocates a better understanding of social inequalities, starting with an understanding of what constitutes equality "to ascertain how far the current situation deviates from it" (2000: 816). An examination of Afghanistan's traditional social fissures and how they have changed in the aftermath could present an interesting point of analysis.

Comparison Across Conflict Countries

Further research can elaborate on Afghanistan's experience alongside that of other countries in the aftermath. There are key aspects of Afghanistan's context that can translate to other countries and present an interesting comparison between countries. An analysis of context, conditions, conflict, and aid involvement could prove to be interesting research. Afghanistan's economic history is one of great dependence on foreign aid. Strategies designed to 'aid' Afghanistan have been created and implemented from the top through ruling elites – without consultation with the people. Afghanistan's context also demonstrates that gains, particularly in terms of social change, have also been followed by rapid reversals

(UNDP and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2004: 165). Perhaps Afghanistan is not alone. A cross-country comparison could reveal further trends in the link between aid and conflict.

Power

Ferguson's anti-politics work presents an interesting entry point into studies of power, inspired by Foucault. It would be interesting to apply Foucault's studies of power to an Afghan context. One can take Foucault's experience in Iran as a good starting point. This marked his only experience of revolution, spawning Foucault's most extensive set of writings on a non-Western society (Afary and Anderson 2005: 2). These writings on Iran are closely related to his theoretical work on discourses of power and hazards of modernity, expressing characteristic aspects of Foucault's worldview including his "highly problematic relationship to feminism" (Afary and Anderson 2005: 5)[206]. Foucault and the Islamist movement in Iran shared "an opposition to the imperialist and colonialist policies of the West" and "a rejection of certain cultural and social aspects of modernity that had transformed gender roles and social hierarchies in both the East and the West" (Afary and Anderson 2005: 39). Foucault lacked a contextualized understanding of Iran, yet his opposition to the secular modern state left room for him to remain uncritical about socially retrogressive movements (Afary and Anderson 2005). It would therefore not be far-fetched to conclude that Foucault would be no friend of Afghan women, particularly in his Orientalist stance favoring a 'premodern social order' over a Western order – and his reproduction of androcentric patterns of discourse (Afary and Anderson 2005: 18). This might merit further study based on the similarities between the Iranian Revolution and Afghanistan's social transformation - in their roles as *cause celebres* for international feminists, and the link made between feminism and modernization as part of a Western agenda.

Men and Masculinities

While the data collected has presented an array of theories and perspectives, the important lesson to draw from this is that well-intended efforts and interventions may in fact produce unexpected outcomes for women. Violence against women is not exclusive to Afghanistan, to developing countries, or to conflict and aftermath countries. It is an epidemic that affects women worldwide and knows no social, cultural, or religious boundaries. It would do a great disservice to women in Afghanistan to isolate their suffering and label it an Afghan phenomenon. This research reveals that a more profound understanding of the gender

[206] However, there are convergences between Foucault and feminists on theories of power and the role of discourses in constructing power.

order in the aftermath is needed. This entails further research into externalities of aid interventions and work on men and masculinities as entry points. There is a need for further research in deconstructing gender identities in different parts of Afghanistan, across different generations and experiences, and even in different cultural contexts (Cleaver 2002: 22). Kandiyoti points to "the sociological effects of a war generation of uprooted male youths" as an important focus (2005: 12). As Nancy Hatch Dupree explained in Chapter I, it is not unlikely that a greater crisis of masculinity will emerge if aid interventions continue to neglect men as partners. This will undoubtedly result in reversing the potential for strategic change for men and women alike.

This story of an aid intervention represents a historical snapshot of an ongoing institutional and social process. This is also a highly political process – with political outcomes. The story began with a contextualized understanding of women and men in Afghanistan to reveal its incompatibility with the discourses that surrounded these women and men. It is a story that argues for agency of both women and men – and demonstrates that it always existed in Afghanistan. The primary argument revealed the disconnects between the pervasive discourses and the realities of Afghan lives. It also exposed the disconnects between policy formulation, intent, interpretation, and implementation. As one result, the sub-argument exposes the effects of such disconnects – namely that aid interventions have possibly made life more difficult for women. It is through the voices of Afghan women and men that this *gozargah*, this juncture in Afghanistan's transition, is understood.

At this *gozargah*, one can only 'work to hope' as Afghanistan specialist Jeanne Bryer explained in the conclusion of my article *Burqa Politics*:

> *Recently returned from research in Afghanistan, Jeanne Bryer asked an Afghan man what his assessment was of Afghanistan's future. His response was, "I work to hope." She understood his answer to mean that an opportunity seems to be lost again. "The world focused on helping Afghanistan after September 11: money was allocated, promises were made, thousands of internationals including heads of state, the UN, media, aid agencies, and businesses arrived and made pronouncements - but things are most definitely going backwards again," explains Bryer... All any of us can do is 'work to hope' - and continue doing what we think is right from a humanitarian point of view. We need to try to understand and learn with humility what Afghan women think is right for them. This would be the right thing for us to do."*

(2004)

And with those words, the Afghan saying upon parting becomes more relevant: *B'aman Khoda*. Go with God's hope.

Appendix 1: Methodology

This appendix provides a supplement to the explanation of methodology already embedded in the main text. As stated in Chapter I, this research set out to investigate renegotiations of the gender order from policy to project outcomes, drawing primarily on the perceptions and experiences of Afghan women and men but also those engaged with women in the aid industry. The study was inspired by a need to illuminate the perspectives and experiences of Afghan women and men during the social and political transition in the aftermath of conflict. In addition, this research set out to understand the discrepancies between policies and realities as perceived by the policies' supposed 'beneficiaries'. Despite significant progress – and policy rhetoric – there remains a void in understandings of Afghan experiences.

This study is the culmination of a ten-year engagement with Afghanistan, including four years of experience working with gender-focused international aid in Afghanistan. Donini writes that "a vast gray literature exists in the archives of aid agencies (and in the memories of aid workers), which remains largely untapped" (2004: 140). It is in this vein that I elected to undertake this research and make the transition from a member of the aid apparatus in Afghanistan to a researcher. I began in 2002 through a reflexive journal and published articles to document and share my observations on the dynamics animating the aid apparatus. In 2003, I began systematically to collect data through interviews, focus groups, and discussions. Policy texts, articles and reports were collected for the study period, December 2001 – September 2005. These dates are relevant as they delineate the Bonn Process, as outlined in Chapter I.

The present investigation began by testing policy discourse against actual outcomes starting with analysis of aid and gender policy texts, followed by a critical reading of the media and popular literature. The latter were tested first against the insights and practices of policy-makers, policy implementers and other actors in Afghanistan's aftermath; and second alongside the experiences and perceptions of Afghan women and men. Findings from all categories of informants have been triangulated using emergent themes. Efforts have been made to close the feedback loop with workshops and discussions to share findings. Indeed, this study was built using an iterative approach that combined triangulation and feedback at various intervals. Triangulation increases the reliability of findings through the use of various techniques and sources. Both data collection and data analysis were iterative processes.

Data collected in earlier stages of the research informed and was tested against data from later stages. Therefore, the data was continuously analyzed and the methodology refined in order to ensure validity of the data.

The core of the data emerged from discussions with gender policy-makers and practitioners and is enhanced by semi-structured interviews with 71 Afghan women who were participants[207] in aid interventions and 50 Afghan men, to collect their views on gender-focused interventions. Discussions and interviews were designed in order to allow respondents to speak for themselves and to raise issues they felt were important at the onset.

This research pursued an empirical line of inquiry to illustrate the story of a group of women involved in an aid intervention, where the rhetoric suggested that women's lives would be transformed. The research also engaged with a methodological line of inquiry to test various techniques that could contribute to a better understanding of the 'development interface', the interactions between social groups engaged in aid interventions – as policy-makers, policy implementers, participants, and agnates – to observe how power discontinuities are recreated and transformed.

Segments of this research build on previously published analysis that has appeared in a variety of articles and reports. All of these are cited where relevant. Further, these findings have been shared in several international conferences where I have been invited to speak and have benefited from critical feedback. Appendix 7 provides a list of publications, workshops, and speaking engagements that also form part of the research. However, the present conclusions are drawn from a fresh analysis of findings in the light of research material collected and reviewed during the period of doctoral research.

Qualitative Methods and the Case Study Approach

Qualitative methods have been used because at this early stage in Afghanistan's development the country lacks reliable data and meaningful indicators, thereby constituting a handicap in efforts to monitor progress (Beall and Esser 2005). Further, qualitative methods are appropriate because the focus is not to judge the outcome of aid interventions but to

[207] For this study, I use the term 'participants' to represent those who might be more commonly known as 'beneficiaries' of aid interventions. The designation 'beneficiary' is passive and falls short as it does not fully convey the depth and complexity of the relationship between actors.

illuminate different actors' understandings and perceptions of gender-focused aid. In addition, I sought to pay particular attention to unanticipated effects – either direct or indirect. Use of various qualitative methods therefore took into account the possibility of such effects – and how these might impact on the success of the aid intervention, based on the perceptions and experiences of those directly implicated.

I used qualitative methods because a study of gender relations – similar to other dimensions of the human experience - does not lend itself to enumeration (Kabeer 1994: 134). Qualitative research has the capacity to reveal both intended and unintended effects in aid interventions. Further, it exposes the changes in understandings and perceptions, the direction and intensity of social change, and the strengths and weaknesses of the institutional structure that was used to operationalize the intervention (Rist 1994: 9). Quantitative data collection techniques could abstract women from the relationships they participate in, thereby reducing a gender analysis to the study of women (Kandiyoti 2003). My interest was in obtaining the perspectives of women *and men* in Afghanistan and examining them in the social settings in which they exist. Examining women served first to explore the "social experience of being a beneficiary" (Mosse 2005: 19). Speaking to male agnates only reinforced their "negative beneficiary status" when compared to the focus of the aid apparatus on women – as the ones who need the developing (Mosse 2005: 170).

Case studies contribute to our knowledge of individual, organizational, social and political phenomenon, and allow researchers "to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events" (Yin 1994: 3). Case studies allow for multiple sources of evidence and can yield rich data. This case study consisted of an in-depth investigation of a select community of men and women in Kabul, Afghanistan engaged in formulating, implementing, and experiencing gender-focused aid activities in the aftermath of conflict. Therefore, purposive rather than random sampling was used in order to select communities that were considered representative of the issue under investigation. For the duration of the research, I was able to use data from my analyses to contribute to the burgeoning theories on gender and conflict and the aid apparatus.

This research was both a political and an institutional ethnography in that it sought to describe and explain the lives of select Afghans affected by an aid intervention in a particular political period in the country's transition. The data is therefore strongly rooted in

the context of Afghanistan's turbulent social and political situation with a view to examining the aid apparatus as an institution in its own right.

Setting

I conducted this research in Kabul, Afghanistan. Kabul was an appropriate location for such research because the aid apparatus and its activities are concentrated in the capital city. Cities present an interesting focus of study as cities are loci of power, and host to competing interests (Beall and Esser 2005). In a discussion of the aid apparatus as an institution, Kabul plays a central role in understanding how aid processes are negotiated and what effects these might have.

Further, as Beall and Esser note, the urban population has increased dramatically since 2002 as refugees and internally-displaced persons are lured to Kabul and other Afghan cities to access the "perceived benefits and livelihood opportunities offered by urban life" (2005: 7). As a result of this mass urbanization, the condition of women has dramatically worsened due to lack of adequate housing and infrastructure. Nancy Hatch Dupree described Kabul in 2004 as a cauldron with a mix of groups with diverse backgrounds, affiliations, and experiences coming into play in a way that appears to be unpredictable. She writes: [In Kabul] "undercurrents heave like fermenting yeast. How these undercurrents will rise is impossible to predict" (2004: 326).

Delloye writes that many rural families might exist today in the same way they have for generations. It is in the cities, however, that the dramatic social changes have been received or resisted. And it is in the cities where, historically, Afghan women have been both delivered and stripped of their rights. Forces of change have been played out in the cities, and the first discussions of women's rights and roles began in Kabul and continue to transpire largely in the capital[208]. Thus, urban women face a particular challenge, and - even if they only comprise a small percentage of Afghan women – "it is on their shoulders that the hope rests of having the country evolve toward modernity" (Delloye 2003: 17). And yet, in present-day Afghanistan, it is not so much a conflict between urban and rural, or city and village, but between a notion of Afghanistan that Afghans have repeatedly tried to defend and an

[208] For more information, see Dupree, N. H. (1996). The Women of Afghanistan. Stockholm, Swedish Committee for Afghanistan.

imported state that has been enforced by external intervention (Roy 1994: 95). This dynamic is well played out in Kabul city.

I was already familiar with Kabul prior to launching the doctoral research as I had spent over one year living and working there. I was therefore better able to access information and conduct fieldwork because of my experience in the country and the credibility I had achieved. The organization for which I worked was a small NGO focusing on women at the grassroots level so that was not inordinately tainted by the extremes of the aid apparatus. Given the real constraints in Afghanistan – security, difficulty traveling around the country, access – Kabul was also the most feasible and practical location for such a study.

1. Methods Used

Textual analysis was used in order to better understand policy formulation and how the gender discourse was formulated and used. This was followed by media and literature analyses to reveal popular perceptions of Afghan women. Policy intent was addressed through interviews with policy-makers, which were in turn tested against interviews with policy implementers and NGO leaders in order to examine policy interpretation, engagement, and implementation. Focus groups and interviews with Afghan women and men revealed policy effects and perceptions of impact at the community, household, and individual levels. Specialist interviews, workshops to close the feedback loop, and ethnographic field notes addressed the link between policy formulation, intent, implementation, and effects – and served to verify findings.

Textual Analysis

The textual analysis examines the aid and gender policy texts of five aid institutions – UNAMA, USAID, UNIFEM, UNDP, and the World Bank – operating in Afghanistan. This is an entry point into the research to determine how these policies are conceptualized and what rhetoric is used. Analyses of at least two of the operating documents were presented for each institution: the core paper at the onset of the study period, and a follow up document to examine evolution of the discourse. An exception to the time frame is made for the Afghan government documents. The most recent aid and gender papers have been used as they represent an amalgam of previous documents produced during Afghanistan's aftermath.

They are also the most thorough and detailed documents available, and therefore they comprise the only exception to the requirement that papers fit within the study period.

In the cases of several institutions, it was not obvious which documents were the most significant. It was a further challenge obtaining some of these documents as they are not available to the public. I therefore began by inquiring of my sources in these institutions as to which documents were the most relevant. In the cases where I was not able to obtain the documents directly, I used these inside sources to obtain the documents in confidence. This was based in my former insider status as a part of the aid apparatus, including my membership as part of the Advisory Group on Gender (AGG).

Initially, the agencies were to be selected based on the size of their financial contributions to Afghanistan during the study period. This proved difficult to determine given the discrepancy between funding that was committed and funding that was actually disbursed. It was also challenging finding accurate figures. Further, the larger donors in Afghanistan are individual countries and bilateral institutions, some of which are more discrete about their financial contributions. It proved more empirically interesting, therefore, to examine those institutions that were most vociferous in their efforts. These institutions were selected firstly based on Afghan perceptions that these were the 'big players' in Afghanistan. These names are familiar to all and are readily employed in general discussions amongst Afghans when referring to the aid apparatus. Further, these agencies have all employed gender language in their program plans and policies. Each of these agencies has a 'gender focal point' representative who sits on the AGG and in fact forms the core group of the AGG. These agencies might appear to be the loudest in terms of a gender discourse, but initial investigations into budgets revealed that this rhetoric is not matched by financial commitments.

I began the textual analysis by organizing the data into key categories of interests, themes, and terms. This was followed by an examination of variations within the text, as well as silences and gaps. It was important to learn both from what was said and what was *not* said regarding gender issues. The use of one word over another, for example, could have denoted a particular perspective. My interest was in understanding how policies on paper are translated into practice and what effects discourses have when they are brought to light in the form of aid interventions. Unpacking the meanings of gendered terminology revealed the ways in which the aid apparatus viewed Afghanistan. Guiding questions follow:

- How do these policies address women and gender issues? What terms are used? How frequently do these terms appear? Are they explicit or implicit?
- What language is used? How is gender conceptualized?
- What priority does this have in the text? This can be represented by the percentage of the text that it occupies and by its location in text structure.
- What changes are there over time (i.e. is there more focus on gender in current plans vs. 2002 plans)? Is there a shift from addressing women to gender or vice versa?
- Do gender and social concepts appear (i.e. gender relations, gender power, etc.)? In what context? To what end? Are they integrated into general or sectoral policy analysis or do they appear as separate concerns?
- Do concepts of technical and political issues appear (possibly manifested by framework of strategic interests and practical needs)? In what context? To what end? For whose benefit?
- What image of women emerges from the text?
- What notable omissions are there?
- Is mention of gender/women tokenistic or does it appear to be relevant part of the text?
- Is 'gender' used in place of 'sex'?
- Any value judgments or assumptions made in text?
- Are gender goals clearly delineated? At whom are they targeted? Who is responsible for implementation?
- Is there mention of effects of interventions?
- Is there a historical, cultural, social analysis/understanding in the text?
- Are men addressed as part of the gender focus?
- Does the distinction between strategic interests and practical needs appear? In what context? To what end?
- How is transformation conceptualized? What terms are used (i.e. empowerment, liberation, etc.)? How frequently do these terms appear?

Discourse Analysis: Media and Literature

It is relevant to understand how the international media and popular literature in English have portrayed Afghan women and what discourses are created and promoted. Content and discourse analysis of media allows for an understanding of world views, values, attitudes, opinions, prejudices, and stereotypes that play no small part in shaping aid interventions.

Indeed, discourses help create and reproduce systems of social meaning, presenting different pictures of reality that can be used to sway others (Tonkiss 1988). Additional details on how this was conducted can be found in Chapter III. Guiding questions included:

- What image of women emerges from the text? Of gender issues?
- What kind of rhetoric is used?
- What measures of progress are used for Afghan women?
- How is transformation conceptualized? What terms are used?
- Is there mention of effects of interventions?
- Is there a historical, cultural, social analysis/understanding in the text?
- Are men addressed?
- What assumptions are made?
- How frequently do terms appear?

For the review of popular literature, I examined book titles and covers using Amazon as the search engine, and "Afghanistan" and "women" as the terms. Chapter III provides further information.

Questionnaire and Focus Group

In March of 2005, I was invited to speak on the issue of Afghan women at the *Women as Global Leaders Conference* in Dubai, United Arab Emirates[209]. At that point I had already been working in Afghanistan for nearly three years. I used the conference as an opportunity to gauge public opinion on the situation of Afghan women more than three years after their liberation and virtual disappearance from the media. The description I prepared for my session was the following:

> *The case of women in Afghanistan remains highly contentious. 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. The country's turbulent history is closely linked to the fate of its women. An analysis of Afghan history will demonstrate that women's rights have always been highly politicized and that gender politics, as much as geo-politics, has provided the impetus for conflicts. Since*

[209] http://www.zu.ac.ae/leadership2005/

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 international aid intervention. Afghan women are used as the barometer to measure social change in Afghanistan. And yet, who has designed this measure? I will argue that a particular discourse on Afghan women was created to justify intervention - a discourse that was not contextualized and largely denied Afghan women's agency. Media images of the downtrodden woman beneath the bourka helped to fuel the rhetoric of 'liberation' and 'empowerment' that characterized aid interventions. As a result, women in Afghanistan might say that they have been neither 'liberated' nor 'empowered'. In my experiences in Afghanistan – both as Director of international NGOs working with women and as a PhD researcher – there is much to be learned from Afghan women about how external intervention can best support them in their quest to be leaders. Afghan women recognize that they face a greater challenge in articulating their own definitions of leadership in the face of a growing global feminism. The challenge is to cultivate responsible and responsive women's leadership training programs that reflect Afghan women's definitions of leadership and their desire for social change on their own terms and in their own socio-cultural contexts.

The audience comprised 40 female participants, mostly American. Ages ranged from 15 to 68 and included students, academics, and aid practitioners. At the beginning of the session, I circulated a questionnaire to the participants and asked that they complete it immediately. The answers then served as the starting point for the discussion on images of Afghan women. A two-hour focus group followed. The questions were:

- Describe Afghanistan after the Taliban
- What is your image of Afghan women?
- What was the media's role in creating this image?
- What was the role of the aid apparatus in creating this image?
- What should the aid apparatus be doing in Afghanistan?
- What are the main obstacles for women?
- How can they be overcome?

Interviews with Policy-Makers

The findings from this focus group session were reinforced by the in-depth, semi-structured interviews with the five senior gender advisors of the five selected agencies. I refer to this group as policy-makers because they were charged with designing gender interventions and setting policies for their agencies in Afghanistan. In addition, the senior gender advisors were responsible for supervising the process of implementation and were accountable to their agencies. Policy-makers were those who occupied senior positions and possessed sufficient authority to assign priorities and commit resources (Rist 1994: 4). It was interesting to note that none of these personnel were Afghan.

Interviews with policy-makers, policy implementers, NGO leaders, and Afghanistan specialists were all conducted in a similar manner. I conducted these interviews individually, spending between one and two hours with each person. I used a digital voice recorder to record the conversations and also took keyword notes during the discussions. I then transcribed the interviews verbatim and often returned to the respondent for additional information – either by email or in person. I had worked with many of those I interviewed. Therefore trust and access did not present obstacles. Because of my previous role as insider to the aid apparatus in Afghanistan, and also because of the recognition I had received for my work in the country, I was able to obtain candid and detailed information that enriched the findings. I was committed to sharing findings of my research and did so through various means including discussions, workshops, and presentations.

The conversations all began with an informed discussion and ended with open questions to allow participants to raise any other issues that they felt were relevant. These interviews began as semi-structured but became open conversations, addressing issues such as the interpretation and implementation of gender programs, the role of the media and images, social constructions of the gender order, and dynamics animating the aid apparatus, amongst others. I then synthesized the data and analyzed the content to identify patterns, trends, and shared perceptions.

In addition to the above, policy-makers were asked specifically about program design, expected implementation, and expected impact. To understand transformation, a component of the social relations framework entails the undertaking of a gender audit to determine the extent to which gender policies are integrated in planning and to understand

the goals of programs and their impact on gender relations[210]. Based on this concept, guiding questions were:

- What are the program goals/targets? Expected outcomes? What specific economic and social changes are sought?
- To what degree are social and historical analyses taken into consideration in design?
- Are women the major beneficiaries? Are there secondary beneficiaries? What categories of women?
- How have programs been designed? Who was consulted in the process? To whom are programs accountable?
- Are distinctions made between gender programs and programs for women?
- How are the different needs and interests of women in the target population defined?
- How does the organization intend to impact women's and men's roles? What analysis has been taken into consideration?
- Is the concept of practical needs and/or strategic interests used or implied?

Interviews with Policy Implementers

Following interviews with policy-makers, I then conducted semi-structured interviews with the gender focal points, or policy implementers, of the selected agencies. Policy implementers are the frontline workers who interface directly with those whom the programs aim to serve. Ten women were interviewed: five Afghan and five non-Afghan.

Policy-makers are significant as they create gender policies, yet the importance of implementers should be recognized as they translate policies into action, often based on their own interpretations. Understanding the implementation process is therefore crucial as it is the interface between policy and the people those policies are intended to serve (Grindle and Thomas 1991). Implementers can therefore exert influence on programs and their ability to achieve policy objectives. Within the context of gender policies this is even more crucial as implementers play a key role in determining whether dominant power relations will be sustained or challenged (Goetz 1997).

[210] For more information on gender audit and possible questions, see Kabeer, N. (1994). Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought. London, Verso.

Interviews with policy implementers addressed similar themes to those above, and also interpretation, engagement, and implementation of policy, and observed/perceived effects. Implementers were asked many similar questions from the gender audit, including the following:

- How are gender policies of the supporting agency interpreted and implemented? What challenges are there?
- Are policies relevant to the local context? If not, can you adjust them? How?
- What is the expected impact of gender policy? What is the actual impact? What are the externalities?
- Are men consulted regarding women's participation? If so, are incentives/rewards used for men to facilitate their acquiescence?
- How have women/men been involved in execution of the intervention? Are women part of project staff? Participants? In governing bodies?
- How does the project affect male/female access to and control over resources and benefits?
- Is there continuing attention to possible changes in men/women's lives?
- Have men/women grown in gender awareness through the project?
- What means are there for consultation prior to intervention? During intervention? After intervention? What accountability measures are in place? To whom is the implementing agency accountable?
- What are your understandings of the policy and how to implement it?
- What changes would you like to see? What suggestions do you have for improvement of the policy and the way it is implemented?
- What frustrations and challenges have you encountered?

Interviews with NGO Leaders

I then interviewed ten NGO leaders – all Afghan. These NGOs were implementing the gender policies on behalf of the larger agencies whose texts I examined. They offered insights into their engagement with policies at the frontline, enhanced by their contextual understanding and long experience in the Afghan NGO sector. NGO leaders were asked similar questions to policy-makers to assess where the discrepancies might be. In addition, questions included the following:

- What is your impression of progress for Afghan women? What are priority areas?
- What are your views on the gender policies of the supporting agency?
- Are gender projects addressing both women and men's needs?
- Are social and historical factors taken into account?
- To what degree can the implementing agency, community groups, and participants influence program design?
- To whom are you accountable – the supporting agency or the program participants?
- What are the greatest obstacles in implementing gender policies? How are they solved?
- What are the main goals of your intervention – strategic or practical?
- Are you able to manipulate the implementation of gender policies to reflect local realities?
- What is the gender order in Afghanistan? Is it important in implementation or gender policy formulation?
- What perceived impact do the projects have on the gender order? What actual impact?
- What is most needed to improve women's situation in Afghanistan?

Focus Groups

In order to triangulate between the feedback received in the interviews, focus groups were held in order to allow selected women who were interviewed to speak as a group and share ideas. These focus groups were held on the premises of an Afghan women's NGO where women frequently meet. Women participants in the NGO program attended bi-weekly sessions where they met in small groups and address issues that concern them. Discussions in groups presented an opportunity to build on existing work and to expand discussions. Women welcomed the chance to meet other women and forge friendships. Sitting and talking about issues that affected their lives in the company of other women was a luxury that their circumstances did not previously allow. This mutuality also served to replace the social safety nets that had been destroyed by years of war, loss, and displacement. These groups brought together women of diverse ethnic groups and geographic origins in Afghanistan, and were perceived as helping to bridge divides and ease remaining ethnic tensions. The groups were structured in a way that allowed for rotational leadership and for the women themselves to decide what they wanted to discuss and to guide the direction of the conversations.

The focus group sessions built on these sessions and recruited volunteers to participate in smaller, parallel sessions. Using this pre-existing forum worked to the advantage of the women. Firstly, the focus group themes were a welcome addition to an ongoing discussion. In fact, they sparked additional discussion in the larger group. Further, the session did not create an additional imposition on the women's time. Many women were already restricted in the time that they were able to participate in the NGO programs. It was therefore important that the collection of data did not create any additional burdens for the women.

During the focus group sessions, women were very comfortable sharing their perceptions and experiences. The groups were told of the focus of the research and expressed willingness and interest in participating. They spoke freely about their concerns and their feelings and were quite vocal in articulating their needs and desires and in voicing their opinions. The discussions were extremely animated and actually sparked additional discussions beyond the duration of the sessions.

Each session lasted approximately one hour. A facilitator was present. She was prepared with a list of guiding questions to stimulate discussion. I was present as a silent observer. In all the sessions, this guiding document was not needed as women carried the conversation comfortably and did not need prompting. In fact, when it became obvious that women were able to discuss the topics at hand without a facilitator and without encouragement, the facilitator took a backseat role and let the women direct the conversation. Focus groups are a good arena not only to obtain varied opinions but also to analyze group dynamics and interaction. Issues and themes raised during focus groups with women guided the questions for semi-structured interviews. Opinions did not change in an individual setting.

Three focus groups were conducted: Pashtun women, women originating from Kabul and other urban areas, and rural women. Each group contained five women. The women present were from different parts of Afghanistan. All of the women had received no education and were illiterate. These women were all participants in aid interventions. The women were all married and with children. A few had been widowed during the conflict and were married for the second time – some by choice and others by force[211]. The women all came to the NGO out of economic necessity and agreed that their first priority was to find a means to support their families financially. The women were all living in relatively poor

[211] Widows in Afghanistan are often forced to marry the brothers of their late husbands. This is in part to protect the woman and also to keep the children with the man's side of the family.

conditions in Kabul city. Some were in multi-family homes and others occupied makeshift housing in the form of containers, abandoned shops, or a combination of tents and walls. These women all felt that the responsibility of providing for their families fell to them. Some of the women were supporting disabled family members. Two of the women had husbands who were drug addicts and therefore unable to work. The women all felt saddened by their experiences during the years of conflict and concern that elements of conflict appeared to be resurfacing in Afghanistan. Many felt the need to share their stories of loss. A few of these women cried as they told their stories. I was told that these women had heard each other's stories before, but that they often felt compelled to repeat the stories in the company of a new audience. Clearly wounds of the conflict will take many years to heal.

Questions were translated into Dari and Pashto and made appropriate to the Afghan context. Many of the terms that were not directly translatable were therefore clearly defined with a view to the connotations they might have. Below is a selection of questions that were used.

Demographic and Identity Information

- Basic demographic data (age, ethnic group, marital status, employment, education)
- Household composition
- Identity ranking and analysis
- What does it mean to be a woman in Afghanistan? A man?
- How has this changed over time based on conflict/aftermath/peace?
- What is the role of Islam for women in Afghanistan?

Perceptions of the Aid Apparatus

- What is your view of aid institutions?
- What do you think is the role of the international media in Afghanistan?
- How is the *chaddari* portrayed by aid agencies? The international media?
- What kind of support would you like? What kind of support would you like to see for men?

Engagement with Aid Institutions

- What brought you to the organization? How did you hear about it?
- What was the reaction of your family to your involvement? Has it changed since you became involved?
- Do you feel that the organization takes your needs/interests into account?

- What do you hope to gain? What have you actually gained?
- What changes have taken place at home since you joined? Are these good or bad?
- How do your husbands feel about aid organizations? Are they involved in programs?

Violence Against Women and in Society[212]

- What kind of violence is there in the aftermath in Afghanistan? Who is targeted? Why?
- How is current violence different from violence in previous periods?
- What is the impact of aid interventions on violence against women?

Concluding Questions

- What is the most important thing for Afghanistan?
- What should be the priority for aid interventions?
- What does the future hold for Afghan women?
- If you could change one thing about your present life...

For men, I asked many of the above questions, including in addition:

- How has your situation changed in the aftermath?
- What are the most important issues for you today?
- Are you engaged in any NGO programs? Why/why not?
- How do you feel about your wife/sister/daughter participation in the NGO?
- What do you hope to gain? What is the most troubling aspect of their involvement?
- Has their involvement changed anything for you at home?
- If you could change one thing about Afghan men today, what would it be?
- If you could change one thing about Afghan women today, what would it be?

Interviews with Afghan Women and Men

In-depth, semi-structured interviews with Afghan men and women provided an understanding of their experiences and perceptions in light of the emerging social reality. This research did not set out to be representative of all Afghan women and men, only of a particular group examined in their natural setting, using methods to understand social meanings and situations. The goal was to hear their own voices and to illustrate common and diverse themes that emerged. These themes – aid, agency, honor, neglect of men –

[212] These questions were asked only if violence against women was raised firstly by the participants themselves.

were then contextualized in order to provide an analytical frame for them. In so doing, it became apparent that this methodology "historicizes narratives of experience by identifying how geopolitics... helped determine the current social formation of Afghanistan. Afghan women's accounts need to be read against this history" (Khan 2001: n.p.).

Interviews present an opportunity to analyze interface situations. These are critical points of intersection between multiple life worlds where discontinuities exist based on discrepancies in values, interests, knowledge, power (Long 2000: 197-8). Social interfaces are meeting points between different discourses (Hilhorst 2003). The interviews were the most crucial part of the research, revealing perspectives of Afghan women and men on aid interventions. Afghan women participants in the NGO were asked to volunteer for interviews. Afghan men who were affiliated with women NGO participants also participated willingly.

Interviews began with a collection of demographic data and continued with open-ended questions that allowed for the respondents to articulate their own perspectives. Further, questions were triangulated when necessary to determine the accuracy of answers. Data was collected from 71 Afghan women and 50 Afghan men. The women were selected based on their participation in aid interventions through local NGOs. Twenty-five of the men interviewed were male agnates of the women participants – husbands, fathers, and brothers. Agnate interviews allowed for a more detailed analysis at the household level and provided useful comparison between women and men's perspectives. The remaining 25 men were selected randomly. All data from the 121 interviews was coded using a tailored database with customized fields for each of the questions. The database allowed for comparisons across categories and presented a cohesive and secure way to store and read the data.

As the questions moved beyond demographics, towards identity, and gender roles, women became increasingly more surprised. These questions were more challenging and perhaps more sensitive. Their expressions were often startled, and slightly amused. The women were generally pleased with their engagement with aid institutions - if they were receiving financial assistance. A few women said that their husbands and families did not know that they were participating in an aid intervention and that they would not be allowed to do so if they had made their participation public. These are from the category of women who were not able to provide an agnate interview. Men reacted differently to the questions. They were frustrated at first, and felt that nothing would result from their participation. They spoke more

freely and openly when they learned the objective of the research – and that their voices would be heard. Fortunately, a male research assistant was conducting the interviews. This contributed to the accuracy of information and the candor of the discussion.

There were notable differences between individual interviews and focus groups. While Afghan women as a whole are articulate, confident and strong, these characteristics were magnified during the focus group sessions. Women as a group expressed more strength and confidence. They were fearless and vocal, building on each other's comments and punctuating each other's remarks with comments of agreement. The sessions were animated and lively, and the hour went by very quickly.

Similar to the individual interviews, women expressed a clear understanding of their roles and repeatedly emphasized the importance of men's and women's roles and how these manifest themselves in Afghanistan. There were a few comments that related to ethnic differences, but on the whole women spoke of a uniform 'Afghan culture'. The women in groups were more forceful in expressing great pride in being Afghan and Muslim. These sentiments also came out in the individual interviews, but these were much more strongly expressed in the groups.

The following table lists demographic data of the sample. This could not be correlated with the actual population because reliable demographic data in Afghanistan is largely absent, and the few figures that exist cannot be confirmed. A population census began at the time of writing in 2005. Data is currently being processed and is expected to be disseminated by the end of 2007.

Demographic Data for Afghan Women

	Afghan Women	Percentage of Respondents
TOTAL	**71**	**59%**
Region		
Rural	45	63%
Kabul	23	32%
Urban	3	5%
Marital[213]		
Married	39	55%
Single	24	34%
Widow	8	11%
Education		
None	42	59%
1-6 year	16	23%
7+ years	13	18%
Age		
17-20	17	24%
21-30	31	44%
31-40	15	21%
41-50	7	10%
51+	1	1%

Demographic Data for Afghan Men

	Afghan Men	Percentage of Respondents
TOTAL	**50**	**41%**
Region		
Rural	33	66%
Kabul	13	26%
Urban	4	8%
Marital		
Married	28	56%
Single	22	44%
Widow	0	
Education		
None	3	6%
1-6 years	12	24%
7+ years	35	70%
Age		
17-20	18	36%
21-30	15	30%
31-40	6	12%
41-50	8	16%
51+	3	6%

[213] Instead of using age group as a category of analysis, I use a life cycle approach that is more relevant to the Afghan context: unmarried, married, widowed.

Couples Profiles, Life Stories, and Life Histories

This aspect of the research took the interviews to another level in order to delve deeper into women's lives and their domestic situations. To this end, ten couples were profiled in order to compare views from the same household. These were obtained through mutual consent of the couples by the male and female research assistant. Each individual was interviewed separately. This was further supplemented by the life stories of 20 women. These can be compared with the life histories of Nargis, Anisa, and Zarmina that follow in Appendix 2. In addition, I also incorporated oral histories with older women to obtain a historical perspective. These various sources should be examined in the light of the discussion in the main text in order to obtain a more robust understanding of Afghan women's lives, based on their perspectives and experiences.

Interviews with Specialists

In order to close the feedback loop, I sought to verify findings through interviews with specialists – Afghan and expatriate – who had a commitment to, understanding of, and engagement in Afghan gender issues. There is a vast pool of such voices in Afghanistan. These open-ended interviews provided the opportunity to share the salient points of my analysis and offer space for comments, feedback, and verification. Mosse underlies the importance of eliciting responses to the analysis "from those who shared the experience and about whom I write" (2005: ix). He states that findings are further reinforced when those who have the capacity to object are actually in agreement.

The discussions were lengthy and detailed. In the few cases where prompting was needed, the following questions were used:

- What image of Afghan women did the world have before the Taliban? During Taliban? After Taliban?
- How has this image influenced aid intervention since 2002?
- To what extent were historical or socio-cultural factors taken into consideration in program design? In implementation?
- How are Afghan women currently portrayed in the international arena (by media, aid agencies, etc.)?
- To what extent are gender relations and dynamics taken into consideration?

- How have these dynamics changed since 2002?
- What are the indicators for change/progress for women? How do we know that programs are working? Whose indicators are they?
- Have Afghan women been sufficiently consulted prior to interventions? Are aid agencies sufficiently accountable to women?
- What are your thoughts on the influence and symbolism of the *bourka* in the eyes of the media and aid agencies?
- How has the focus of the aid apparatus on Afghan women changed since 2002?
- How has international funding/support for Afghan women changed since 2002? Is there a link between media and aid focus on women and the funding that is received?
- Have efforts to secure women's participation for the upcoming election been sufficient? What are the main issues and potential pitfalls?
- Is there a long-term strategy on the part of the aid apparatus for Afghan women?
- What is your assessment of the future for Afghan women?

Workshops and Presentations

To bring my research to a conclusion, I hosted several workshops in order to share findings and receive feedback. These workshops also helped to close the feedback loop and verify findings. I conducted one workshop with the NGO leaders and Afghanistan specialists and a separate workshop with the policy-makers and policy implementers from the five agencies. Additional presentations and workshops held are listed in Appendix 7.

Ethnographic Field Notes and Reflexive Journal

This research qualifies as an organizational and political ethnography because of the careful documentation of observations in the form of ethnographic field notes and a reflexive journal, maintained from the onset of my arrival in Afghanistan. Underlying the above methods is a continuation of the field notes from my experiences in Afghanistan since September 2002. I was not a researcher at that time, but was already making preliminary observations on the Afghan context, NGO life, and work with women that has informed my study and inspired my initial interest in the subject. The notes I took were reflexive[214] in that

[214] "Reflexivity requires a critical attitude towards data, and recognition of the influence on the research of such factors as ... the sensitivity of the topic, power relations in the field and the nature of the social interaction between researcher and researched". Miller, R. L. and J. D. Brewer, Eds. (2003). The A-Z of Social Research. London, SAGE.

they examine not only the context, namely life within an NGO working with women in Afghanistan, but also analyze my role and how I came to understand the observations I have made. I therefore benefited from longitudinal observation of program participants that enabled me to measure change over time – observing and documenting processes and shifts to which the women were exposed and how they coped with them, based on their role as participants. The outcome has been a more nuanced understanding of processes of change for Afghan women since 2002.

The reflexive research journal existed alongside field notes. The field notes presented a detailed description of my observations, while the journal placed me in the context and enabled an understanding of my relationship to the research, allowing space for me to comment on the findings and narrate the experience. During my first year in Afghanistan (2002-2003), many of these notes were published by various online sources, used for promotional purposes, posted on the Women for Women International website, and disseminated widely. Below are additional excerpts from these reflexive notes. In January 2003, I wrote the following about working with women in groups:

> *These women have never had the luxury of spending time outside of their daily lives talking about issues that affect them, in the company of other women... These sessions are based on Women for Women International's manual, A Woman's World. This entails a discussion on the range of issues affecting a woman's life and uses exercises, anecdotes, examples, and discussion to illustrate different scenarios. The idea is that the woman can then determine for herself where she fits in the spectrum. By so doing, she takes ownership of the decision and is better able to implement these changes in her own life.*
>
> *The first session always starts by hearing about each woman's life and experiences. The women are asked to introduce themselves and share one thing they find unique about themselves. They also talk about what they hope to get out of the program. The women are then asked to spend time thinking of what they would like to name their group. Freedom, Hope, Wild Flower, are but some of the names that have emerged.* Where do you see yourselves in one year? *We often ask. The answers are telling... not begging, with children in school, with my own business. All of these things are possible.*

Most of the discussions revolve around particular themes. One such example is our discussion on the role of women in post conflict reconstruction. We asked the women if they were a delegation going to see President Karzai, what would they recommend that he could do to ensure peace in the country? One woman said that she would create a program where all Afghans could trade in their guns for pens. In so doing, education will replace the violence that the country has known for so many years.

The collection of longitudinal data is often difficult as it requires ongoing observation and discussion over a period of time. I was fortunate to be able to observe 3000 Afghan women program participants and 65 Afghan staff (both women and men) over the period of one year (2002-2003). I maintained contact with select participants and staff and was therefore better able to understand the impact of changes in the aftermath on their lives. For the duration of their participation in the program (one year), I benefited from observation, discussion, and debate, as women freely shared with me the concerns they had and their experiences and perspectives.

Women participants in the program repeatedly conveyed to me that they resented the foreign-imposed division between men and women in aid interventions. They felt strongly that they did not identify with 'being a woman' in a vacuum. As the first year progressed, they became increasingly doubtful of their ability to continue participating. Many explained to me that their situation was more difficult at home and the men in their lives were feeling increasingly disillusioned and frustrated. These words led me to question many of the assumptions made by the aid apparatus in its work in Afghanistan.

The following are select profiles of the women who were participants in Women for Women International's program in the first year. These profiles appeared in my published journals and have been taken verbatim from the entries written in January and March 2003. It was women like these, and many more, who inspired this research. It is through these women's lived experiences that 'progress' (or lack thereof) can be measured.

Nargis

Nargis is a woman in her early 20s. She supports eight children – seven daughters and one son. She was married at age 13. Her husband, a heroin addict, recently abandonned her to return to Pakistan. She was left to care for her young children.

She washes clothes to earn a living, and one day hopes to gain a skill that can better support her children and pay for their education.

Anisa

Anisa's husband repaired televisions and tape recorders, both of which were banned by the Taliban. During the Taliban regime, he continued to operate the workshop in secret because he had three children to support. One day, the noise emerging from a broken tape recorder attracted Taliban attention. As a result, he was beaten to death. Two years later, at age 25, Anisa was forced to marry her sister-in-law's 17-year old son, still a student.

Zarmina

Zarmina supports a disabled husband. Kidnappers from the North tied one of his legs to a tree and the other to a car. They forced Zarmina to pay 100 Afghanis (the equivalent of $2.00) or they threatened to kill him by driving the car and breaking his legs. Zarmina begged and borrowed and was able to gather the money. But the kidnappers still left her husband disabled. He cannot work, but hopes to make enough money to buy a vegetable stand in the bazaar.

Nargis, Anisa, and Zarmina's stories are but a few of the 3000 women that I worked with in my first year in Afghanistan. Observing their lives over a one-year period permitted me to achieve insider-outsider status. I recall author Tamim Ansary's quote in 2000 explaining that we are presented with a historic opportunity "to support the real empowerment of Afghan women without engaging in a cultural tug of war with traditional Afghanistan" (Mehta and Mamoor 2002: 25). It was my experiences with women such as these that allowed me a rare insight to Afghanistan.

With many of these women, I achieved a level of trust and friendship that most non-Afghans could not. Azoy speaks to the power of friendship in Afghanistan as a way to obtain a more accurate picture of a particular situation:

This honesty-oriented connotation of friendship reveals a set of cultural assumptions: that the true nature of any phenomenon is hidden; that everyone typically tells you whatever suits his situational purposes; and that only the true friend will share the truth as he perceives it.

(2003: x)

I was in a rare and privileged position, with an obligation to nurse it delicately and share it wisely. I became very conscious of my responsibility to share the understandings that I had acquired. I did not seek to obscure the diversity of people's lived experiences, as Beall says, by disseminating general statements (1996: 4). Instead, I saw the essence of Afghan recovery as an amalgam of these women's stories, and began to share them for that purpose.

2. Positionality and Challenges

In qualitative research, it is challenging to balance insider and outsider status. Despite having worked very closely with women in Afghanistan over many years, my role as a researcher required that I maintained a professional distance in order to obtain the information that I needed. Further, I had to be aware of what those interviewed might gain (or *think* they might gain) from saying one thing over another. Accounts would inevitably vary according to where these women and men were socially positioned - as well as their wish to talk (Burman, Batchelor et al. 2001: 454). Anthropology also can be challenging if divorced from an historical perspective in that it can present a partial view of social reality, representing a detailed portrait of a particular group in a specific setting at a specific point in time.

Situating Myself

I recognize that my own identity as a researcher cannot be abstracted from the research process. In acknowledging my own position, I create space in which to consider the way my origins and background have shaped my field experiences and interpretations (Sayigh 1996: 146). Firstly I situate myself as a developing world feminist with solid experience in the developed world. I recognize that my feminist consciousness was born out of my own origins and experience, but that it took shape in the developed world[215].

Although I am an outsider to the lives of women and men in Afghanistan, I have spent sufficient time working closely on the inside. Jacobson explains this tension and how she has found ways to reconcile it in her work in Northern Ireland: "The tensions of 'outsider' status... has only been partially compensated for by building up longer-term relationships with a

[215] Narayan speaks well to this experience. Narayan, U. (1997). Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third World Feminism. New York, Routledge.

number of organizations" (2000: 184). In my experience in the country, I established strong contacts with people affiliated with a variety of organizations in the country and therefore was better able to access information relevant to my research.

I was in a unique position to investigate Afghan women because I was able to gain their trust through my work. I had demonstrated my commitment to them, and also delivered for them in my previous work. For this effort, I was rewarded with an honesty and loyalty that many outsiders would not see. In addition, my skin color offered me access to their private realms. I was frequently mistaken for an Afghan, and therefore in a position of privilege to hear 'the real story'. My special access was not revoked when I corrected the mistake because I was assumed to be from the region and therefore familiar to them, and familiar with Afghanistan. Because of this, I was often asked by Afghan women to explain to others "how Afghans are". I was told this was because my background was similar, and so therefore I must understand them. During my four years in Afghanistan, I was frequently placed in the role of cultural interpreter for outsiders – be they part of the aid apparatus or the media or other – who were too far removed from Afghanistan and its realities to understand the context. Because my origins are Arab, it was assumed that I was Muslim. As a result, the women assumed that I was also better equipped to explain to others the centrality of Islam to the lives of Afghans. I was therefore in a privileged position as both "Other" and interpreter of "the worlds and understandings of the Other into a discourse or knowledge form that can be understood and accepted within the dominant Western frameworks of knowledge and culture" (Edwards and Ribbens 1998: 3).

Language

Translation and language were challenges that I overcame by employing two Afghan research assistants – male and female - who were fluent in Dari, Pashto, and English - to accompany me. These research assistants were former members of my staff and were therefore very familiar with aid issues, accustomed to working with me, and highly credible and capable. These assistants served as my interpreters during interviews and my cultural and contextual interpreters after interviews. They also assisted in translating and transcribing the data. I was able to verify the accuracy of translation using my existing professional network in Kabul. I was also assisted by my rudimentary Dari and an understanding of the many words that are common across Muslim countries because they are rooted in Arabic.

Safety and Security

Research in post-conflict contexts such as Afghanistan presents certain security risks. For the duration of the research, I was sufficiently aware of the environment and therefore able to avoid certain high-risk situations and seek help when needed. I maintained contact with a variety of security personnel, including those with the UN, International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF), and the Afghan NGO Security Office (ANSO). I accepted that it was my responsibility to remain informed of any ambient dangers. I also ensured that I was prepared for the emotional risks that such research entails. This included being aware of the possibilities of vicarious trauma and the opportunities for self-care in this regard. I therefore sought to minimize insecurities – both emotional and physical – through knowledge of the context and ensuring that I was well prepared for the undertaking.

Human Subjects Protocol

Researching women in Afghanistan is a particularly sensitive subject that requires an understanding of potential risks and ethical implications. In this vein, I sought to ensure that I did no harm to participants in the study and set out to safeguard their welfare and interests within the context of the research. This research followed human subjects protocol based on principles of respect for participants in the research and recognition of the risks they might face in participating. These include psychological risks such as anxiety, stress, or discomfort in discussing the subject matter; social and economic risks that might diminish the subject's status in relation to others by virtue of having participated in this research; and loss of confidentiality. To this end, all information that was shared was in strict confidence given the sensitive nature of the research. Names have either been changed or withheld. Participant consent was obtained verbally, and each person understood the nature of the research, the purpose of their participation, and the expected final outcome.

Area of Investigation	Unit of Analysis	Method	Sources Examined	Interaction of Sources
Formulation: Policy	Aid institutions Public sector	Textual analysis	Aid and gender policy papers: 5 international agencies 2 Afghan government	-> informs discussion with policy-makers and implementers
Formulation: Gender discourse	Media and literature	Discourse analysis	Headlines of major U.S. newspapers from 2002-2004 Book titles and covers	-> informs understanding of gender discourse
Formulation: International perceptions	International actors	Questionnaire Focus group	40 questionnaires Focus group discussion	-> demonstrates extent of international perceptions
Interpretation: Policy	Aid institutions	Open-ended interviews	5 Policy-makers from above agencies	-> issues raised set NGO discussion
Interpretation and Implementation: Policy	Local groups	Open-ended interviews	10 NGO Leaders implementing projects for above agencies	-> informs understanding of implementation plans
Implementation: Policy	Aid institutions Local groups	Open-ended interviews	10 Policy implementers implementing projects from above agencies	-> issues raised set focus group themes
Effects: Perceptions and experiences Impact for community	Community/supra-familial groups	Focus groups	4 focus groups: women: 3 groups, 5 women/group men: 1 group, 3 men/group	-> issues raised set interview questions
Effects: Perceptions and experiences Impact for individuals	Individual Afghan men and women	Semi-structured Interviews	71 Afghan women 50 Afghan men	-> informs effects of above
Effects: Perceptions and experiences Impact for couples Impact for individuals (in depth)	Couples Individual Afghan women	Semi-structured interviews	20 women life stories 2 women life histories 10 profiles of couples	-> provides in-depth understanding of effects
Link between policy formulation, interpretation, implementation, effects	Macro	Open-ended interviews	20 Afghanistan and gender specialists: 10 Afghan 10 expatriate	-> closes feedback loop
Link between policy formulation, interpretation, implementation, effects	Macro	Workshops, publications and presentations	NGO leaders and policy implementers Policy-makers	- > closes feedback loop
Link between policy formulation, interpretation, implementation, effects	Macro	Ethnographic field notes Reflexive journal	Notes from 2002-2003, continued during field research visits	-> informs process and shows changes over time

Appendix 2: Mini Case Study:
Advancing the 'Gender Agenda' Through the Parliamentary Elections

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In September 2004, just prior to the presidential election, I wrote the following for an article on Afghan women:

> *Presidential elections in Afghanistan are scheduled for October 9. In the past few months, a major campaign has been launched to bring women to the polls. This entails a poster campaign, but little else, [a gender advisor] explains. "Women should be called in a meeting forum at a local mosque or school so that they can learn about their rights. From what I know nothing of this sort was ever done...As a result, many women will not vote since they may view it as a 'man's duty."' In a country with little history of or faith in central government, exercising civic duty is not a priority. In discussions of women's role in politics, one [Afghan] woman told me, "What good is politics? Look at where it has brought Afghanistan."*
>
> *Current security risks in Afghanistan have made voter registration a difficult task. Violence has increased in recent months, and agencies are concerned about sending staff to rural areas. The recent deaths of female election workers has slowed the registration process. Further, the process is a lengthy one as most women will need to be approached individually and within their own homes, [a senior UN official] explains.*
>
> *Although many women have registered, true representation is a challenge. It is unlikely that women will vote differently from the men in their household, and men will vote to keep themselves secure. [A gender expert] explains that "most rural areas have commanders whose word is law, and no one would be likely to vote against the commander's preferred candidate for fear of persecution. In other words, both women and men will do what they are told."*
> (Abirafeh 2004)

As the final step in the Bonn Process, the 'free and fair' parliamentary elections of 18 September 2005 were an ambitious and controversial undertaking. The Afghan

Constitution of January 2004 established that 25% of the seats in *Wolesi Jirga* (House of the People) and Provincial Council were to be reserved for women[216]. This is a very progressive quota that only a handful of countries in the world have in place to ensure women's representation. Such a quota would place Afghanistan as 20th in the world in terms of women's representation in a parliamentary body. The quota itself is hailed as a victory achieved through pressure by Afghan women's groups and the aid apparatus, including such countries as the US where women hold only 14% of congressional seats (Greenberg and Zuckerman 2006: 3).

However, while this may seem impressive at first, many of those interviewed expressed skepticism. They were concerned that women were once again being used as window dressing and that this progressive quota served to appease international donors at the expense of laying a foundation for genuine participation. In countries in transition, it is not unusual to see social and economic rights decrease while formal political rights are put in place[217]. Quotas have been used both for the Emergency and Constitutional *Loya Jirgas* to ensure women's participation in the political process[218]. Many interviewees felt this to have been a good start, but it also appeared to be tokenistic. "Right now our women are all over the place, being used for politics, used like dolls," an Afghan woman head of an NGO lamented. "Every event they are in front of the TV, the camera. They are being used just to show that women were there". Interviewees felt that, 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 et al. 2005: 131-2).

The parliamentary elections were initially expected to coincide with the October 2004 presidential election. The unstable security situation prompted a delay, and the elections

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[216] For more information on the composition of the parliament, see www.jemb.org

[217] Donna Pankhurst speaks well to this phenomenon. See Pankhurst, D. (2000). Women, Gender and Peacebuilding. Department of Peace Studies Working Paper. Bradford, University of Bradford. CITE 1996 ONE

[218] Kandiyoti confirms that women were harassed during the Emergency Loya Jirga, the Constitutional Loya Jirga, and the Presidential election. This clearly did not set a good precedent for women's political participation. For more information, see Kandiyoti, D. (2005). The Politics of Gender and Reconstruction in Afghanistan. Occasional Paper. Geneva, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development.

were then scheduled for April 2005. In the months prior to the April election date, there were concerns that the elections would be delayed further. The pervasive sense, according to myriad discussions with organizations such as the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and others was that the country was ill-prepared for elections. While one arm of the UN apparatus was plowing forth with elections, another arm was counseling caution. The UNDP Human Development Report warned against conducting elections too soon after conflict and before 'peacetime politics' have had a chance to take root. The report stated clearly that "ill-timed, hurried, badly designed or poorly run elections can actually undermine the process of democratization" (2004: 142). Others also expressed concern, explaining that the parliamentary elections run a greater risk of failure than their elections predecessor (Reynolds, Jones et al. 2005: 3).

Moreover, the completion of this last step of the Bonn Process was met with fears and rumors that the aid apparatus would begin plotting an Afghanistan exit strategy. Researchers and political analysts in Afghanistan cautioned that Afghanistan would need many years of continuous international support. Plans for a premature exit of the aid apparatus could destabilize – and most likely collapse – the country's tenuous foundation[219]. Elections, with their deadline-driven nature, bring the impression that the work is done when the election has been held. As such, they are the "holy grail of western transition formulas, providing moral cover for exit" (Johnson and Leslie 2004: 169).

The parliamentary elections were finally held on 18 September 2005, despite security issues, threats, and warnings. These elections signified the end of a period of transition and represented a chance not to repeat the breakdowns of state and society that characterize Afghanistan's recent past. In the months leading up to the elections, female candidate participation was widely visible, particularly in Kabul city. Campaign posters peppered city walls, and anecdotes of women's participation abounded. For instance, in the northeast of the country, one pregnant female candidate traveled by foot for eight days in order to present her candidacy to the *Wolesi Jirga.* And so the stories went, liberally employed as evidence of the Afghan people's commitment to democracy. Afghan women's groups have argued that women's participation in political life in Afghanistan

[219] For a full report on this, see Wieland-Karimi, A. (2005). Afghanistan: Looking Back on 2004, Looking Forward to 2005. Kabul, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

appears to be a favorite subject of aid institutions and the media, but Afghan women themselves have barely broached the topic. The Women and Children Legal Research Foundation pointed out that both Afghan women - and Afghan men – who sought to enter political life had been given relatively little attention, despite rhetoric.

Myriad reports, such as the Afghanistan Human Development Report, argue that proof of women's commitment to political processes comes from the numbers of their participation (2004: 79). The report seemingly contradicts itself from the prudent counsel it offered above. If proof of commitment were indeed measured in numbers, this would pose additional problems since the figures emerging from elections – particularly the parliamentary elections – have been highly contested[220]. The report from the Women and Children Legal Research Foundation on women's political participation argued that the government might boast the participation of women in the 2004 presidential election, but inequalities remain because women continue to have symbolic assignments in the cabinet and key positions. The report argues that very few women have been given the opportunity to access higher positions and use their leadership skills (2005: 56-7).

Interviews with gender policy-makers and policy implementers 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). Most of those interviewed agreed that injecting women into all aspects of the democratic process would not address women's interests. Indeed, numbers do not necessarily translate into equitable participation and might not lead to an understanding of issues of power when measuring participation. Leaders of Afghan women's NGOs felt strongly that women's participation should be for a purpose, not to appease international donors or to satisfy aid institutions. Johnson and Leslie cite a quote by an Afghan woman about the elections:

> *Why should I vote? ...This election is for you not for us. You will have it and then you will go, leaving us with a system that has no roots in our country. You can grow new*

[220] This is due to suspicions of fraud, ballot stuffing, and unclear procedures in polling stations. See www.jemb.org and related articles for more information.

systems, yes, but it takes time; they need to put down roots. And the Pashtun women in the countryside, they will be herded like cattle to the voting stations. They will be just voting fodder. What meaning does this have?
(2004: 174)

An Insider's View

As an insider to the parliamentary elections process, I often found myself asking similar questions. In 2005, I spent six months as the Senior Gender Officer and Head of Gender Section for the Joint Electoral Management Body Secretariat (JEMBS), under the auspices of the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS) Afghanistan Project Implementation Facility (APIF), managing the 2005 parliamentary elections. This lengthy title simply meant that I was responsible for all things 'women' and 'gender' related to Afghanistan's parliamentary elections. In this capacity, I was tasked with supporting women's representation as candidates, voters, and electoral officials. To this end, I conducted trainings with women's groups and reported frequently to the Ministry of Women's Affairs Elections Task Force, chaired by the Minister.

In assuming the position, I was told by a senior gender advisor of a UN agency that I was just a "warm body" filling a politically-motivated post that the elections officials felt should exist because "this is Afghanistan, and everyone wants to know about women here. The issue of gender is so contentious and everyone expects that someone will have to do it". The elections officials were comprised of an international team who traveled the world 'bringing elections' to countries attempting the transition to democracy. This team had not previously included a 'senior gender officer' and therefore there was much confusion as to what role I would play. This was evidenced by the fact that I was hired several months after the elections team was in place, indicating an obvious pressure to have someone 'do' gender, whatever 'doing gender' really means.

I took this confusion as an opportunity to create my own work, using my experience in Afghanistan and familiarity with the context. I began by viewing 'gender' in the full sense of the word. I hired a man on my staff, and began a campaign working with men to help them better understand the role of women in the political process. This entailed meetings

with Afghan *mullahs*, or religious leaders, and the heads of Afghan political parties (all men). The challenges that women were facing became clear to me when I was told by a particularly bushy-bearded political party leader that he would under no circumstances endorse women's political participation and told me: "Women have no wisdom, Women are 'sick' for seven days of every month. They cannot think. They cannot judge. Their judgment is impaired. They cannot make decisions for the country".

I was also responsible for managing eight provincial focal points responsible for gender and civil society issues. These focal points, known as REROs (Regional External Relations Officers), were tasked with submitting a report to me on a biweekly basis detailing their efforts to engage women and to work with men to advance the so-called 'gender agenda'. According to the report from the Southeast Region on 11 September: "In Paktia province, (there was a) male-dominated elections meeting saying that it is against Pashtun culture to allow women to participate"[221]. This was not a unique sentiment. And this sentiment was not at all unique to men. An Afghan woman elections staff member told me she did not "believe in elections" when I asked her why she did not vote. She had taken the job for financial reasons and felt that the pressure for women to vote was nothing more than an opportunity for journalists to photograph lines of *chaddaris* in line as evidence of 'democracy in action'.

These sentiments were pervasive, even within the elections team. It was believed that the pressure to 'get the numbers' outweighed the quality of civic education and participation. A massive campaign was underway to reach the most remote villages, but the result was shallow. In one village, the elder greeted the elections team for civic education with pleasure, asking: "Are you coming here to tell us the results from the last election?" In the end, the elections were characterized by a relatively poor voter turnout and a discrepancy in figures that took months to resolve[222]. At the closing of elections day, the elections team stood by the head of JEMB as he gave a briefing to an auditorium filled with international press. As we listened to the briefing, a colleague turned to me in surprise and said: "I didn't know the elections were such a 'success'!"

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[221] The RERO reports were collected by the Senior Gender Officer and used for internal information. They were not released publicly.

[222] Final figures as listed by JEMB can be found at http://www.results.jemb.org/reports.asp

In one of my weekly press briefings to a group of 15 non-Afghan journalists on gender issues in the elections, I was told that we – the aid apparatus – were too smug in our boasting of 25% seats for women. In reality, women outnumber men in the population, and therefore the representation in parliament should reflect this, I was told. This came from one male journalist in a room of 15 European and American journalists – 13 of whom were male. It was at that point that I realized that Afghanistan was being subjected to unrealistic goals and standards that did not even apply in the so-called developed world. A non-representative group was demanding women's representation. Not too long afterwards, an article appeared asking:

> *America has had democracy for 200 years, and during that time no woman has been nominated to the presidency, nor are there large numbers of women in the cabinet... so why are they imposing on others what they don't have or don't want?* (Saeed 2005)

This lesson was again brought home to me one Friday as I listened to the sermon coming from the mosque down the street. "Do not vote, I tell you!" the imam wailed. "These foreigners are trying to strip away your Muslim identity by imposing their 'democracy'!"[223]

In the end, 'doing gender' proved to be difficult to coordinate with the elections objective. 'Doing gender' failed to accommodate to the deadline and deliverable-driven elections timetable. There was little recognition among the elections team that gender is a process that requires a long-term investment – not unlike civic education. These entail political consciousness-raising and cannot be brought about through technical solutions and numbers in polling stations. The one-time presence of women at the polls did nothing more than appease the aid apparatus. The presence of the aid apparatus (read: funding) could have put pressure on Afghanistan to set a high quota for women in parliament through its Constitution. Many women that I spoke to in my research and professional capacity felt that the aid apparatus unknowingly put women at risk by aggressively promoting their public presence.

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[223] During that sermon, the *imam* also preached against the consumption of frozen chicken imported from New Zealand as it had the same effect!

Intimidation of Female Candidates

Women expressed much concern – and fear – when faced with the question of presenting their candidacy. Two women I spoke with had considered running for office but were discouraged by their husbands. Another woman decided not to nominate herself when her husband and brothers learned she would have to be photographed for the ballot. They told her having her photograph taken and displayed publicly would bring shame upon the family. One female candidate told her story:

> *During my electoral campaign, I was going to different villages and places when I was doing my campaign. When I was talking to women, it turned more into a "woman gathering" and women started talking to me about their problems. I noticed and found out that there is a huge, really really huge difference between women activists and intellectuals and educated women - and women in those villages and remote areas. There is a need for us to find solutions and ways to help these rural women. How we can help them to be aware of who they are and how they live? There is a huge difference between village and cities. When I noticed that it was only 20 days until election day, I noticed that my speech for women was too difficult. They didn't know what I was talking about. They didn't know what was voting and who to vote for. When I noticed that they had difficulties presenting themselves and understanding, I decided to stop my campaign to them and instead spend time talking to them to understand their issues. The result was that in election day, they were going like cattle in a group with a shepherd, leading them to the election and putting them in the centers. They were told what to do. They didn't have any independence or the room to use their right to vote in the way they wanted. What does election mean for these women?*

Voter turnout was much lower than expected because of a campaign marked by intimidation – particularly against women candidates and voters (Human Rights Watch 2006: 14). Officially, JEMBS received regular reports of intimidation of female candidates that were echoed throughout the media. The JEMBS official position was that it received very little official information about the incidents through their security reporting structures,

or that they were unable to confirm the incidents. For example, two such incidents that could not be confirmed were cited in JEMBS internal security reports[224]:

> *14 Sept: Female Wolesi Jirga candidate shot and injured in Nuristan province.*
>
> *Inconclusive. No information about possible motive for this attack.*
>
> *7 Sept: Reported attempted murder of female Wolesi Jirga candidate in Nangarhar province.*
>
> *Inconclusive. [Security company] confirmed that it was coincidental that she was near to this attack.*

The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) produced three reports in conjunction with the UN Assistance Mission to Afghanistan (UNAMA) to track progress on the parliamentary elections and raise concerns. These reports, known as the "Joint Verification of Political Rights" frequently mentioned women and gender issues as primary concerns. The first report, for the period 19 April to 3 June, noted that "there is a broad perception that intimidation and limitations on political rights are pervasive or will increase" (2005: 3). "Female candidates... have also voiced concerns about their security. In some areas women only registered in the last days of the nomination process to avoid security threats" (2005: 7). The report also explained that Afghan society is ambivalent about women's participation in political life, stating that women "internalize these norms and fear bringing dishonor to their families if they expose themselves to public critique by standing as candidates" (2005: 10). The pervasive sense in the report was that the country was just not ready for such aggressive change.

The second report (4 June – 16 August) does not report improvements. During this period, acts of intimidation against female candidates forced some of them to withdraw. Female candidates continue to feel threatened and have been intimidated and attacked. There were also numerous threats and attacks against women election workers (AIHRC-UNAMA 2005: 11). Further, many mosques have been publicly condemning women's participation, calling it un-Islamic and anti-*Sharia*[225]. The situation continued to deteriorate. The final report, for the period of 17 August to 13 September, reported that four male candidates

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[224] These were obtained in my professional capacity at JEMBS. They were not released publicly.
[225] *Sharia* is the Islamic code of law, based on the Koran.

were killed and that "women candidates have been the target of a number of acts of discrimination, intimidation and violent attacks" (AIHRC-UNAMA 2005: 4). Religious leaders also continued to dissuade people from voting for female candidates and from permitting their wives to participate in the election.

Human Rights Watch was also actively monitoring cases of intimidation of female candidates, stating that security in Afghanistan had deteriorated in conjunction with the elections, particularly in the form of high-profile cases of social and political violence against women (2005: 15). Women were increasingly targeted, the report elaborated, and they feared that pushing social norms would incur greater retaliation. The report continued:

> *Women candidates exposing themselves to public review risk retaliation for disrupting social norms. Violence and intimidation against these women is highly symbolic and sends a chilling message to other Afghan women considering expanded roles in public life.*
> (2005: 3)

Another article stated that Afghan men believed that women have become candidates at the "command of Laura Bush" - otherwise it would never be allowed, as it is perceived to be un-Islamic (Rubin 2005: 6). It was not only Afghan men who believed that the parliamentary elections were a decree from the Bush family. A more provocative American article stated:

> *Females, once considered worth less than scum by Muslim males, are now coming into their own in Afghanistan, thanks to an ongoing democratic planting. There is no other answer but to recognize that it is because of the Bush administration and US assistance in that Muslim country that much progress is being made on numerous levels.*
> (Swank Jr. 2005)

Afghan Perspectives

According to research conducted by the Women and Children Legal Research Foundation in Afghanistan, 58% of 600 people (525 women, 75 men) surveyed believe that women should not be involved in politics (2005: 52). In a further survey of 130 women, 85 women did not feel that women should be politically active. These findings can be confirmed by the JEMBS Gender Unit's own research to gather perspectives of Afghans. Prompted by a concern that Afghan voices were not heard in the days leading up to the elections, I decided to send my staff out to collect 'voices from the street'. A random sample of Afghan men and women was selected and 20 on-site interviews (10 women, 10 men) were conducted prior to the elections. Of the ten women, five said they were not in favor of women running for office. Six of ten men said they do not believe that a woman should have a role in the public domain, particularly not in political life – a realm traditionally reserved for men. One woman who was interviewed had the following to say:

> *I don't vote for women, because I don't want a woman to act as a leader or have the authority or power, because women are not capable of playing this role. They will lose themselves easily. It is important for women to vote, but they should support men candidates more than women. [The reality is that] people in Afghanistan don't want woman to take on prominent roles among the people... There are many obstacles for women. And maybe they cannot be removed.*

Another woman also shared this view:

> *I'll never vote for a woman. And it has reason, because in Afghanistan women can't do anything without men's permission, so they are not independent and always want to be with men and look to men to support women.*

When asked if she thinks it is important for women to vote, the woman explained that these kinds of things are nice to have on paper. "For policy, it is good", she stated. She elaborated that women voting serves to appease the aid apparatus and fulfills its agenda. "For real work, it is not perfect", she continued. She explained that in reality these things do

not work as one would expect. She felt that women are powerless in the home, and therefore they would be powerless in a public office. She explained it this way:

> *Women candidates cant do anything without their husband's permission and can't even make small decisions on their own. And also security is not perfect for women candidates. For example, in some provinces women can't distribute their posters and they are not allowed to go to rural areas and cannot be far from their homes.*

She concluded by asking: "What is the point of women in office with all these restrictions? Afghanistan is not ready".

A man who was interviewed on the street of Kabul expressed concern that women would not be able to serve the people any better than men:

> *In my opinion I won't vote for a woman, because if I vote for a woman I don't trust that she will work more than a man does. Also if we have good men who are very educated and more capable than women, why shouldn't I vote for a man?*

He recommended that women should vote, and had the following to say: "My advice for women is to vote for men candidates, because as I mentioned men are more powerful than women and they are capable of doing every type of work".

The man felt that the biggest obstacles to women's participation are their lack of credibility, security issues, and cultural obstacles. He elaborated:

> *There are different issues [between men and women's participation]. As an example if a man stands before people in a public area and starts his campaign every one will stand and listen to him. But women can't stand in front of a crowd except in some areas because of lack of security and inappropriateness. First their families don't allow them, and if their families let them work the society is not familiar with that type of situation. It is better for women not to try hard because they must keep themselves quiet otherwise they may receive punishment or harassment.*

When asked if he believed that women should be represented in parliament, he had the following to say: "It is good if we have some female representation in parliament and if not it is okay also. We have our men and they do whatever needs to be done for both men and women".

One man believed that women in Afghanistan are facing fewer obstacles than men – in terms of participation in political, social, and economic life. He felt that men should be the focus of attention as well as the primary political actors. One man said he would not vote for a woman because she would be biased towards women and would thereby rob him of the rights he enjoys now. The sentiment of political power as a zero sum game was heard frequently on the street. Another man said he would rather cut off his own hand than vote for a woman. He did not feel the need to elaborate any further on his sentiments.

In a discussion with former Minister of Women's Affairs Masuda Jalal on women's participation in the parliamentary elections, she emphasized the importance of support from husbands and families of female candidates. "Without support of their husbands or families, they cannot do this," Jalal elaborated. She illustrated her point using her own example during her campaign for the presidential election:

> *My husband often accompanied me to provinces. I did not have guards so he acted as my security too. Sometimes, if I was at a gathering and I was tired after speaking so much, he would speak for me. He said, 'She is my wife; she has a lot of experience; she is capable'. This is the best endorsement – because he knows me well. Husbands and fathers should be supportive. They should help by going out to speak to male voters.*
>
> *Ours is a male-dominated society; they have the political power at the level of making decisions - whether in parliament or as head of the family. The best way to tackle the issues is to convince men to give freedom to women and daughters. Local Mullahs are very influential. If we can secure the cooperation of the religious community, it will have a positive effect on opportunities for women.*

It is very important to target men. The programs should contain very primary messages and should encourage men and influentials [sic] to come forward and cooperate. It should be done with the target audience in mind – and should speak their language.

These views are reinforced by myriad press articles with quotes from Afghans – candidates and voters – expressing discomfort with the 'democracy' agenda. For instance, in a local paper, a male candidate for the *Wolesi Jirga* claimed that women who hold political office will "eat the rights of men". Another article reported a political party leader as saying: "We will never accept the Western interpretation of democracy in our Islamic republic which they are trying to implement in Afghanistan" (Coghlan 2005). Another candidate said: "The rights the West talks about are not the rights we accept. A woman's rights as given in the Koran are enough" (Coghlan 2005). Yet another article reported that candidates are "not happy" with the quota for women, saying that Afghans were "overdoing things under the pressure of the international community" (Biswas 2005).

In the Afghan press, from the weekly publication *Rozgaran*, an article entitled "Imposed Parliament" appeared, stating that: "The Afghan government, the Western world, and the electoral commission had no other objective but to have a parliament for the country no matter of what standards" (Wilder 2005: 35). Indeed, Afghans were not impressed with their new parliament, or with the elections process. In 1980, Louis Dupree wrote the following prophetic words: "Take dry constitution, combine with fluid elections and stir, and voila, "instant democracy" – without the agony of generations of development" (1980: 587).

Post-Elections

While the strong performance of female candidates is touted - many won seats in their own right and not based on the quota – these are the minority. It is generally believed that most of the women would not have reached the parliament without the support of the quota (Tarzi 2006). In a discussion with the head of an international foundation supporting parliamentarians, he explained that the members of parliament face death threats if they return to their constituencies. Even during parliament recess, the parliamentarians fear

returning to their provinces of origin because of security. The current climate is not conducive for an effective parliament, he explained:

> *The parliament hasn't made one decision yet. They have nothing to show their constituencies. They have no idea of their own job because it hasn't officially started yet. How can they convince their constituents that democracy works when they have nothing to show for it? No roads, no schools, nothing.*

He continued to say that it is moot to discuss so-called 'higher issues' when basic concerns such as security have not been met. As far as the aid apparatus is concerned, the parliament is an old issue. He explained that the parliament received much attention leading up to the elections, but now there is a general sense that "the job is done". As for the international media, if they speak to parliamentarians, "it's only to good looking women - or warlords". Indeed, the 'warlord problem' has yet to be resolved. Many have noted the parliament's domination by "warlords, criminals, and discredited politicians responsible for much of Afghanistan's woes since the Soviet invasion in 1979" (Human Rights Watch 2006: 14). It is these very warlords who continue to harass female parliamentarians and question their presence in what should be male political space.

The parliament is not the only political space where women's presence is under attack. The cabinet has also lost its female members. Twenty of President Hamid Karzai's nominees for the cabinet and supreme court were approved by the parliament in June 2006. The sole nominated woman - to the Ministry of Women's Affairs - was rejected. The head of the international political foundation explained that many justify Karzai's action by saying that there are no qualified women to fill ministerial posts. The reality, he explained, is that there are many qualified women, but nobody bothered to look. When asked by a journalist about the absence of women in his cabinet, Karzai explained that the cabinet was recruited "for practical reasons" and "not political reasons". Karzai argued that the "place of women in Afghanistan has been secured, and women have the support of the people" (Noory 2006). Many have found these statements hollow.

> *The progress achieved by these women was meant to be a starting point for the increased participation of women, not the end... The new government's reticence*

> *to confirm any women to power invited speculation that the appointment of the first three women ministers were simply symbolic gestures meant to appease the international community.*
> (Noory 2006)

A few weeks after the elections, I held a 'Post-Elections Debrief on Women's Participation' bringing together 20 gender representatives from agencies such as UNIFEM, NDI, FES, UNAMA, and others. The two-hour conversation resulted in many contentious discussions[226]. On the quota, participants felt that the aid apparatus had promoted this aggressive program with little regard to the risks that women would face as a result. In the words of one participant: "There is a security issue we need to consider here. And implications such as violence against women. We might need to rethink this". One participant asked:

> *Is JEMBS as an organization gender-sensitive? Is it the role of an electoral management body to do 'gender'? What will happen when the international staff leave and no one is there to push the 'gender agenda'? Gender receives much attention, it is politically important. But for the next election this attention might fade and then there needs to be more push to get gender on the table. It needs more than a 'gender section'. It needs a section with authority. Not just calling itself gender because that's what everyone expects.*

In an online communication about the future of the Afghan government and its obligation to uphold a "[Western]-engineered Afghan democracy", one Afghan man had the following to say about the presence of the aid apparatus and its dictates in Afghanistan: "There is one thing unique about Afghans: we do not appreciate when we are told what to do. Millions of Afghan have died declaring we rather die proud and free than to live a life of bondage"[227].

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[226] Quotes from the meeting of 13 October 2005 were extracted verbatim from meeting minutes. These were for internal JEMBS use only and not shared publicly.
[227] Communication from distribution list to select members, 28 March 2006.

Appendix 3: Profiles of Couples

Couple 1: Fatima and Amanullah, Wife and Husband

Fatima is in her early 30s. She has had less than two years of education. Amanullah is 41 years old and has had seven years of education. The couple is originally from rural Afghanistan but they moved to Kabul two years ago to live with Amanullah's brother in hopes of finding work and providing for their three children. Fatima explained that Amanullah's brother, her brother-in-law, is bitter about the extensive focus on women. He is not happy that Fatima attends trainings and tries to convince Amanullah to prevent her from going out. Many fights have broken out in the household as a result. Amanullah is beginning to think that participating in trainings is not such a good idea. Neither Fatima nor Amanullah are particularly pleased with the efforts of the aid institutions. Amanullah is concerned that Fatima will start to respect him less with all these new ideas she is gaining from the training program. Fatima complained: "You tell me what my rights are, but what is the point if he won't give them to me? He should understand them first!"

Couple 2: Maryam and Alam, Wife and Husband

Alam is 37 years old and has had several years of education in Kabul. Maryam is 31 and has completed primary school. They have been married for 12 years. Maryam believes that, according to Afghan culture and traditions, women are respected and protected in Afghanistan, but that things have deteriorated in recent years. She believes that men are responsible for women and must provide for the family. Alam feels that it is a man's duty to guide women. "Women are innocent creatures", he said. "They need protection from other men. Men are in upper level [more] than women". Alam feels that institutions are undermining men's traditional role. He explained that aid institutions are changing "women's minds against their husbands and are encouraging them negatively". Alam further elaborated that the aid apparatus is interfering in family issues. Maryam is concerned because "not much is done for men". She feels that this could cause problems for her at home.

Couple 3: Zainab and Ahmadi, Wife and Husband

Zainab and Ahmadi are from central Afghanistan. Their livelihood was based on agriculture. They are not happy to be in Kabul and find that they do not like the direction Afghanistan is moving in these new times. Zainab sees a lot of violence against women around her. She sees this as a new manifestation of an old struggle, but the difference today is that the "position of women is better than men in the society. Priority is given to women in every aspect of opportunities". Ahmadi is a day-laborer and is able to bring home an irregular income. He is still hopeful that he will find more stable work. As long as he is working, he says that he is happy that Zainab is learning a new skill. He sees that other men are cruel and angry, and he does not think this will happen to him.

Couple 4: Storai and Hekmat, Daugher and Father

Storai is Hekmat's daughter. She is 21 years old and is not yet married. There are concerns that she is getting too old for marriage. Once she marries, she will have to stop studying and participating in trainings. Storai has witnessed how changing regimes have impacted gender relations and have led to increased violence at home. It happens in her home. She does not want to get married, she says. Hekmat recognizes that there is more conflict and argument at home these days. He hopes for a day where men and women can return to their Afghan ways and respect their traditions and religion. He is not sure that day will come.

Couple 5: Lida and Fawad, Wife and Husband

Both Lida and Fawad are from the countryside. They have no education. Both feel very strongly that Islam provides the answers to managing changes that are taking place in Afghanistan today, particularly those between men and women. Fawad feels that it is his job to support his family and provide for them. He prefers that Lida stay at home. Unfortunately, Lida is participating in a vocational skills training program and he is at home. Although aid institutions provide his family with an opportunity to earn an income, he is not happy with this new international presence. He says "they have done nothing for men" and he would prefer a return to "Afghan ways" and an Afghan pace of change. Fawad feels that Afghans are not in control of their country, and he is concerned.

Couple 6: Sweeta and Payman, Wife and Husband

Sweeta and Payman are in their 30s. She has had a few years of education. Payman has had nearly 10 years of education and is a teacher by trade, although currently unemployed. Sweeta feels that Payman's profession as a teacher has helped her to have greater access to education and training. But she knows that Payman is unhappy that he is not working. The aid apparatus has done nothing for men, she says. "My husband says that they make men angry when they do nothing for them and only offer opportunities to women. He is a teacher so he understands how people think about these things". Sweeta feels that recent changes have brought "uproar to families". Payman agrees that he has seen an increase in family conflict because women are no longer satisfied "with what men expected from them".

Couple 7: Sara and Waheed, Daughter and Father

Sara is 18 years old. She is not in school, and this upsets her. She says that women in Afghanistan still cannot study and work, despite what they are told to believe. Her father appears to be an advocate of education for women and men, but he does not think the current climate is conducive for Sara to go to school. He explained that "since the Americans came, we are told that men and women have freedom and can work outside and learn", but he feels that the situation is still unstable. Both Sara and Waheed feel that things were better for men and women before "the Americans came". Sara says that "some men think that women are being cared for more than men. But the reality is that both men and women suffer".

Couple 8: Masooda and Fayzal, Sister and Brother

Masooda lives with Fayzal, her older brother, and his family. She is concerned that men are not getting training and are therefore becoming much more rigid and traditional. Her brother is one of those men who could benefit from training "to become open-minded", she says. Fayzal thinks that a woman should be satisfied with her role as wife and mother and that women today are asking for too much. Aid institutions have encouraged women to leave the house, he explains. These institutions do nothing for men, he says, "only women get training but then they stay at home and it is useless". Women should stay inside for their own protection, he believes. Masooda is his responsibility, and she is getting too many ideas already.

Couple 9: Frozan and Waisuddin, Wife and Husband

Frozan is 35 years old. She is illiterate. Her husband, Waisuddin, is more than ten years her senior. He grew up in Jalalabad and attended six years of school. Frozan receives food aid that she hands over to Waisuddin to distribute to the family. Her job, she says, is to "make the society by raising good children". She would rather not be the only bringing home food. Waisuddin has become more strict in recent years. "Women must obey what their husbands command", he says. Women are safer under the *chaddari*, he explained. He'd rather that the women in his family not leave the house at all, particularly his wife. Frozan's new role as the breadwinner has made her "stand in front of her husband"[228], Waisuddin says. He believes that this new influence is taking Afghans away from Islam. Aid institutions "keep people away from Islamic prayers since they give them money and they forget to pray".

Couple 10: Safia and Mirwais, Daughter and Father

Safia is 19 years old and has had three years of education. Her farther, Mirwais, has had eight years of education. Safia sees violence in her family and feels that violence has always been a part of gender relations, but it takes different forms in the different periods of history. She explains that "women argue with their husbands because they are not allowed to go outside. That caused their husbands to beat them". Safia says that "the government has set some rules that men can't beat their wives and they no longer have power to be cruel" but she is not sure most men know about these rules. Mirwais thinks that the world does not have a good image of Afghan men. And he feels that aid institutions have not helped things at home because "most men think that organizations are creating distance between men and women by encouraging women negatively". He is not sure what the future of Afghanistan holds.

[228] By this he means Frozan is confronting her husband, or facing him with new confidence.

Appendix 4: *Maida, Maida*[229]: Women's Life Stories

Qatra qatra darya mesha
Drop by drop, water becomes a river

This Afghan expression has been employed as a saying used to advance the women's movement. It advocates slow, gradual change. In this vein, it is important to observe Afghan women 'drop by drop' in order to better understand the significance of the changes in their lives over time.

The following are life stories from select women who were interviewed. These women all felt the need to talk about their lives and their contexts. Many women began the interviews with stories of their past as a way to illustrate their unhappiness in the present and the extent to which their lives have not improved. The stories of Nargis, Anisa, and Zarmina present good starting points for women who were filled with hope in 2002. They believed that their participation in aid interventions would better their lives. The below profiles were collected three years after those of Nargis, Anisa, and Zarmina. They provide a sample of the perceptions and experiences of women four years into Afghanistan's aftermath. There is more sadness that characterizes these stories, and noticeably less hope. There is also a hint of disappointment in the lack of changes in their lives in the last three years. In fact, these women felt that their expectations were raised and now their hopes are further thwarted. Their stories speak to these themes.

Zachaha

Our family consists of 12 people. We are four families who live in one house. We live in one room. Most of our family is women and small children. I am not literate. Because of the war, we moved from one side to another, so I couldn't study. With much difficulty we spent six months in Pakistan. We spent our time knitting rugs so we could provide a little food to keep us alive. I lost a daughter during the war, but now that we have peace in our country I want to live in peace and comfort. I've already suffered a lot.

[229] *Maida, Maida* is the name of a famous Afghan wedding song. The word *maida* means slowly, making small steps. In the central part of the country, however, *maida* can also be used to mean broken.

Wahida

I want to tell you about my tragic life. Twenty years ago, I was a young single girl. I studied in school and my only dream was to be educated and serve my country. But one day – I can still remember it – when I came home from school I realized that my cruel parents had promised me to an army officer without letting me know. Nine days after my engagement I got married and I went to my in-law's family. I suffered a lot after that day. My marriage was terrible. Life was getting worse day by day. Then many years passed in my hard life. My husband developed mental problems because of the war. We tried to cure him, but he did not get well. One day he left us. It has been 11 years and I do not know if he is alive or dead. I have a son from my lost husband. I lived with my father-in-law but he was not kind to me and didn't support me. I went to live with my mother and we went to Pakistan where we spent two years as refugees. We heard about peace and the new regime, so we came back to our country. Now I am free to go outside the house and work. I want to make a good life for myself and my son. I want to make a small amount of money to save for my son's future. My story is very long. If I tell it all, days and nights will pass and I still won't be finished. So I will stop now in hope of peace in my country.

Laila

During the fighting between parties, we moved to many different places to escape the violence. We were in Mazar-i-Sharif for about seven years, but we were not comfortable when the Taliban captured the city. They killed people, cut hands and legs, genocide and many more things happened. They also killed one of my sons. Then we secretly left Mazar and came to Kabul City. But unfortunately some other problems came into being... the difficultly of paying for house rent, material, food. Prices got higher because people are coming back to their homeland. I live in one of my relative's house for free. But life with them is difficult for me. I don't have a house of my own. I live in a room that doesn't have windows. This is only a small part of my painful story.

Habiba

I want to tell you a little about my life. I hope that you won't get tired of my life story. We have passed very difficult days and severity in Afghanistan. Maybe you have watched it on TV that how difficult was life in Afghanistan. We passed our life with poverty and didn't have anything to eat for many years. I have a son who lost his hand. We Afghan women suffered and passed our lives with many difficulties. Lots of Afghan women are illiterate or not literate enough. There is nobody to help us. I am wondering about the future. I am a woman with many problems in this time. There is no one now to help us, even God.

Homa

I have five children. I am jobless and I don't work. My youngest child is in second grade at school. I don't know how to provide clothes and food for ourselves. It is very difficult for me. I raised my children with difficulty. I fed them with dry bread, because I didn't want people to tell me that I do not know how to look after my children. They are going to school, but I can't provide them school supplies and also clothes and shoes. I don't know from where I should provide them these things.

Dil Jan

I had a good and comfortable life, but all the fightings have destroyed my life. Afghanistan has been a country of war for many years, more than half of its population is living in crisis and poverty. I'm from the poor women of this part of the world. My husband cannot find work. My children are very young. I don't have any breadwinner at all. I need help to make my life better.

Bibi Shirine

In our country according to the cultural system no father asks his daughter regarding her life. Without asking my father gave me to a man and we get married. Fortunately I was happy with my husband long time and God has given us four nice children. After long time when the conflict started in our country I lost my husband and the difficulty has shown her face to me. No one helped us, my children and me. I sold my only home and spent it all for my children feeding. There was no job

for me and I started to sell my home assets to continue my life. Now I am old and I cannot work. We spent our life in very difficulties.

Mahboba

My husband is disabled. I have six children but they are small and can't work. I and my daughter are working hard to earn money to provide a piece of bread for ourselves. I don't have any house. We have to live in a kitchen with my children. During the fightings also we lived here in this kitchen, because we couldn't afford to live anywhere else. I've spent days in hunger, nights in the darkness without any light or electricity. I am not able to prepare anything for my family. We are in debt. I have more to tell you but you may become sad so I will bring my story to an end. Maybe you know about the life of an Afghan woman, filled with that much pain and difficulty that I'm not able to express it.

Nadera

During 23 years of war, the economic, social, and political situation was not good. We suffered a lot, and we had to live in difficult situation. Now in Kabul City, the situation is getting better, but not in other provinces. There are still warlords and gunmen in other provinces. My economic situation isn't good. I became a widow 16 years ago and my oldest child is 15 years old. I want my children to get educated and also find money to feed them and improve my economic situation so my children serve their country and society, not to destroy it and be away from education.

Sohila

I am a mother of four children and owner of nothing at all. My husband got lost during the cruel Taliban's regime. Except my four children I have to take care of my husband's old parents. I live only in the hope of my husband's return to home, but there is not any news of him recently. I actually don't know if he is alive or dead. Right now I am the only breadwinner for the family of seven people. Nowadays the rent of the house that I'm living in has increased, I can't afford it.

Rogull

Now let me tell you about my life. I got married when I was 15 years old, my husband was 25 years older than me. Now that 10 years has passed from my marriage, I haven't seen any good behavior from him. He puts a lot of pressure on me and my children. I am really tired of my life. My sons are seven-year old twins and my daughter is nine years old. They are all very young. I don't know what to do. Since the day of my marriage I haven't had any comfortable day. I've always worked myself. I am not sure what to do with my life. My husband is very old now and I am 23 years old. I can't live alone now because of my young children. I have to suffer everything. I have a very painful life. He always insults my children. I don't have permission of anything inside my own home. I don't have any hope for a better life now. What should I do? How should I spend my life like this?

Maimona

We have been immigrants in Pakistan in a tent three times. When I was five, my father died. And my mother died 12 years ago. I have one sister. My brother martyred 15 years ago in fighting. From the time we came back to our homeland from Pakistan we haven't had a house. I live in Khairkhana in a shop which is someone's property. I am washing clothes to earn money to provide my family expenses. My husband is not a good person, he always hits me and my children. I was an official worker in government during the Taliban regime. I was fired from my job. I was begging from shops and houses. I have worn bourka and crying and begging and I have got a mental problem.

Shima

I want to tell you of my tragic stories that happened during the Taliban regime. Before the Taliban, I had a comfortable and peaceful life. I was always satisfied. Some months after the Taliban came, life was no longer easy in Kabul City. Every day they created a new policy for people to accept. We couldn't tolerate it so we left our home and went to Pakistan. We didn't have the comfortable life anymore, and we had to suffer being refugees. But after the Taliban's failure, we immigrated to our beautiful country. We had lost all our life. There was no house left, no things. During these years of war, houses of people were all destroyed. It has harmed

people's economics. Since I was bon, I have only seen fighting, bombing, destroying, and damaging, nothing else. I haven't felt happiness, peace of mind, and friendship ever. I don't know what it is like. I hope to find all these things in the future. I want to hold true friendship in my arms.

Abida

During 23 years of war, our country was destroyed and now American people are helping us to rebuild. All Afghan people spread to everywhere. Most of them went to other countries as refugees. Most of the women lost their husbands and became widows. Children lost their parents and became orphans. People have lots of economic problems. They have lost their homeland. I support my three children. I lived in a place where I could only hear the sound of bombs and rockets. I was very hopeless in life. I hated everyone. Now I know that there are good people living in this world, but in the past I've seen very cruel and bad people. We spend each night to face the day and each day to face the night only in hope of help and kindness. We wait for those who will take weak people's hands in order to help them.

Shekiba

I have suffered the war because of the ones who didn't want our country to be in peace. During these wars we couldn't escape from here too because we didn't have enough money to leave and stay in other countries, so we had to suffer and get burnt. I live in Qalai-Musa, a dirty and poor area of Kabul City which has destroyed streets, no electricity, and no water supply. Our house is made of mud and clay. The windows are covered with plastic paper instead of glass.

Roya

My 15 year old son is handicapped. We don't have anyone to support and help us. Because of facing sorrow and sadness I can't see very well with my eyes. I was five years old when my father died. I lived with my aunt. When I was 13 years old, my aunt asked me to marry her son. After a few years, my husband left me and married someone else. He ignored my children too. Then, after some time I heard that he had died. Wars and fighting made our life more difficult. But now Allah has

shown his kindness and has brought peace to our country. I would like you to convey to the peace-loving women there that Afghan people, particularly women, have faced many hardships. And now they are experiencing the very first freedom and they are learning to struggle for further rights.

Hafiza

I am living with twelve members of my family in a rental house. We don't have salary and we don't have jobs. We have many economic problems. And we are wondering how to continue our life. My husband is jobless. I have a baby that I can't support with my own milk because we are not eating good foods. There is no milk in my breasts.

Khatol

I am going to tell you about my life: I am responsible for providing my family expenses. There are five people in our family. I live in a house that has been destroyed by a rocket. I wash clothes to provide some food to feed my fatherless children in order to pass my life. This is the life of an Afghan woman that I am sharing with you.

Khalida

I am single and I live with my old father, two brothers, and one young sister. We are total five people in our family. I couldn't continue my education because of bad economical situation. I live in a rented house. We have a very simple and poor life. I myself sometimes wash clothes in houses to earn living. Now that I have enrolled myself in this organization, I am very happy that I get support. It is like a drop of water that a person pours into the mouth of another who is in a dry desert. That is the drop of water that is going to save her life.

Qandi

It will be a long time until all the women in pain in Afghanistan are able to live peaceful lives. During these past years we were left from everything. During the dark regime of the Taliban, women didn't have the right to go out of their houses. We were in debt and hungry. And we are still not able to pay the debts. I really

want to forget all the past. I want to struggle for a better life. I believe that we are all women and we are able to help each other from anywhere around the world. I'm from a very poor family, but my spirit is always strong, not poor and weak.

Appendix 5: Women's Life Histories

Mariyam: Waiting for Change

Mariyam was 35 years old. She was a mother of two small children. She cannot read and hoped that one day she will have enough "free space in [her] head to think of such things". For now she must find a way to support her children because her husband could not. Her family lived in one small room and shared a cooking space with the family in the adjacent room. "This is how our lives have become, in this time of *peace*" [emphasis hers], she said. Her husband was unemployed. He tried to find work as a day-laborer but was not able to bring home a steady income. "He is angry", Mariyam explained "and so he has turned on me, and turned to drugs. What can I do but tolerate this? I am a woman, after all".

Mariyam told the story of how her life had changed:

> *My husband was kinder to me during the Taliban time. We were both scared. I felt safer then. We both had no opportunity for work or leaving the house. Life was very difficult but we struggled together. We were equal in our suffering.*

Today, she said:

> *Afghan men are not given chances. But this is not our fault. Afghan women have always been patient, strong, brave, silent. We do what we must do to support our families and feed our children. If I don't go out and take advantage of this [waves hand around organization office], how will we live? He cannot. He wanted to before, but now he is an addict and he is useless to us. But he is my husband and I have no choice.*

Mariyam felt that relations between men and women were deteriorating, not just in her household, but in those she saw around her.

Women are still struggling to make better their relations with men. It is not easy because there is still violence against them. It is a man's job to take care of the family and children financially. In most families that I have seen, relations have gotten worse because of poor economy. It is a bad thing, this change.

Mariyam explained that part of the tension between her and her husband was primarily because she had become the 'man' in the family. Further, she was going out of the house. And, even more serious, she was "involved with foreigners". It was not just her husband, she explained. "Men don't like their women out of the house, especially with foreigners". She elaborated:

I wish that women would work in local and governmental organizations and schools, not in foreign NGOs. It will cause them problems with the men if they work with foreigners. But I am here because this is where I get money.

If there were opportunities for men to work, and for [Afghan] men and women to work together, things will change. But I do not know what opportunities men have. I see many of them without opportunities. Organizations are promising rights that women can not achieve and can not understand. On paper, women have been given rights and freedom. But in my mind, women expected more rights because that was what was promised to them.

Mariyam was not unlike other Afghan women she knew in that she was able to make astute observations about the work of the aid apparatus and the impact its presence and programs have had. She explained:

Women are the center of interest for everyone. I never imagined I would see a day where foreign people don't stop talking about Afghan women. Every day in this organization some people come, some journalists come, and they want us to tell them that our lives are better. They want us to tell them that we are not wearing chaddari, that we are happy. They think we are stupid. And when they go away, we laugh because we have nothing else we can do. The world is watching, and this is what they want to see.

Mariyam had the following to say about the international obsession with the *chaddari*:

> *The foreigners say, 'remove your bourka, bourka* kharab *(bourka* is bad*), but I say Afghanistan* kharab. *Afghan men* kharab. *Until we change this – and we will never change it – my chaddari protects me. I put it on and 'where is Mariyam?' No one knows. And Mariyam comes and Mariyam goes. And Mariyam stays safe. What choice do I have?*

Still, Mariyam was able to end on a positive note. "I hope for a bright future", she said. "What else can we do but hope?"

General Nazari: Making Change

General Nazari was the Deputy of the Human Rights Department in the Ministry of the Interior (MoI). She also represented the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission in the MoI. She was tasked with training and assigning women police officers to handle women's security issues. General Nazari also worked to sensitize men in the MoI to women's human rights and security.

General Nazari's story was a rare one. She had served with the Afghan police for 31 years. In 2002, she became a general. Her father was in the military, and, although he was a liberal man, he did not want his daughter to follow suit. General Nazari recalled her father taking a trip to Turkey and returning with new ideas about women. He began to advocate for women's education, and he expressed opposition to his wife wearing a *chaddari*. At age 5, while watching a military parade with her father, General Nazari had decided on her course in life.

General Nazari was serving as a police officer at the beginning of the Soviet invasion. She sent her husband abroad to protect him, while she remained in Afghanistan with their three small children. He returned many years later, but she had decided that she did not want a husband. She continued to invest in her career and served as a role model for women. She expressed concern with the current direction of her country, and asked why

organizations were not working with men. She explained: "It is not only women who need help. In Afghanistan you may think that women don't know anything and men do. But this is not the case. Both need help".

When asked about women's security issues and the prevalence of violence against women, she strongly stated that violence against women has increased recently because men are having difficulties dealing with changes in women's rights and status. She elaborated:

> *In all the world, violence against women is increasing, not just in Afghanistan. But we are Muslim people and we need to study gender issues and women's rights in the context of Islam and society in Afghanistan.*

General Nazari explained that the large international presence has prevented women in Afghanistan from defining their rights for themselves. Furthermore, it has created resentment with men who feel that their own issues are not addressed. Even in the context of violence, she explained, violence against men and violence against women by other women are unacknowledged problems and are never discussed. She elaborated that the international community only talks about women's rights in relationship to men. General Nazari put it this way: "Women and women! That's what the men say. This makes difficulties and problems in families because all men hear from the outside is 'women and women'. They no longer know where they fit".

On the concept of gender, General Nazari explained:

> *'Gender' has not had a chance to define itself in Afghanistan. It is unknown here and does not translate. People think gender is brought from other countries and doesn't belong to Afghanistan. But when we say equality of men and women, then the people say 'Yes. This is in Islam. Yes. This is in the Constitution.' But 'gender', this is foreign to us still. In this society, it is difficult for people to accept changes so quickly.*

Appendix 6: Closing the Feedback Loop

As discussed in Chapter I, this research was part of an iterative process spanning four years, and an interest spanning over ten years. In terms of dissertation research, the FES *Lessons Learned* Report[230] constituted a major first step in the sharing of my ideas. The bulk of the feedback received stems from this report and the subsequent meetings, discussions, and debates that ensued. The report was produced in the spring and summer of 2005 and released in September 2005. Its release was accompanied by a public presentation that allowed for discussion in addition to several smaller presentations. Those who were interviewed as part of the report formed part of a round-table discussion and an electronic conversation. Those who were not interviewed were also part of a separate discussion. All of these events provided feedback that has since been incorporated and has helped to refine my initial ideas.

I also presented findings from the FES report at the international forum of the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) in Bangkok, Thailand in October 2005 and at the annual conference of Women as Global Leaders in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates in March 2006[231]. These events also provided feedback that contributed to the data. Upon completion of data collection, I once again conducted various workshops and sessions to share findings and solicit comments and input – both from those who had formed a part of the research and from those who were independent – to verify the findings. I received the following emails from Afghanistan and gender specialists, policy-makers and policy implementers, and interested others sharing their views.

A researcher, professor, and specialist on Afghan women had the following to say:

> *The main thing that struck me is that [men] thought many women hear about "women's rights" through international channels but they do not know what that means or how they should or can go about getting/asking for rights within the Afghan legal context ... and this creates conflict and they believe that for some of*

[230] For additional information, please see Abirafeh, L. (2005). Lessons from Gender-focused International Aid in Post-Conflict Afghanistan... Learned? Gender in International Cooperation. F. E. Stiftung. Bonn, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

[231] For more information, please see www.awid.org and http://www.zu.ac.ae/leadership2006/

the self-immolation victims this was part of the cause ... a clash between the discourse of women's rights without the understanding of the definition of rights in Afghanistan.

An independent gender specialist and published author on Afghan women came across the FES report and sent the following email in March of 2006:

I was hoping to get a chance to speak with you about [one of my projects] because I think you would probably see the same dilemmas I do as I think about how to "translate" many of the Western notions that underlie the field into something that is progressive and possible and built from indigenous Afghan thought. Ever since I got the request to help with this, I've been of really mixed opinions as to how this might work and in whose image.

I just thought [the FES report] was great and raised so many important issues that are exactly what I'm trying to figure out re [my new project] and the questions of relativity and respect and empowerment and shared language, or lack thereof...

I'm also looking for some options for getting back to Afghanistan to continue looking at women's resilience, which I hypothesize may be both positively and, more concerningly, negatively impacted by liberation from above, which I suspect destroys the sense of agency, empowerment and community control by and for women that was found at the grassroots level. Now while some women have seen improvement, many have seen none and others have lost informal, community opportunities for agency as elites, "experts", and government and international controls are put in place.

I'll look forward to hearing more, especially about your new position [as Senior Gender Officer for the Parliamentary Elections] if you are interested in sharing what must be very challenging work given the time frame and the escalation in backlash against women and others that appears to be in the works.

A leader of an international NGO in Afghanistan working very closely with women had the following to say:

> *My personal opinion today... is that the West is trying to push its own kind of thinking on programs such as the Parliament, women in Parliament trying to get women to form a group in Parliament and so on. I think we are way too ahead of the past here and we are all guilty of this....we all come here with our own preconceived notions, experiences and so on and try to structure programs according to what we did in other countries. It is obvious from the way the West arrived here in 2001 to today. Just look at the hearts and minds effort by the European armies (they don't learn any lessons, even recent lessons from other countries where it didn't work), the promise of a better future, a better tomorrow by the West if you adopt democracy or "our way" without explaining the context that it is going to take years and years and will not happen overnight, the consequent disappointment, disillusionment of Afghans because the pace of change to improve their daily existence is too slow, their expectations are dashed, their security is not improved, the cost of living rises and salaries do not, lack of jobs. Where is the leadership to explain that things take time, to help people understand? But then you have the massive corruption, the drugs, warlords, criminals and those involved in the most awful atrocities back inside the circle of power. Is it any wonder people are skeptical? Who explains to them why it may be necessary to keep your enemies close to your side.....and anyway have they really changed, are they really going to adopt to a new system or are they already planning the downfall of this government....there is so much to be done and already the corruption is massive, and women naturally are the ones who have to deal with the consequences of all this every day. Men frustrated, young lads with no prospects of work, the arranged marriages and the bridal price. Well, I better not go on.... there is fault on all sides but I find it hard to believe that for most women life has not changed much in the past 5 years but the West will proclaim "freedom for women".... I wish it were so.*

The gender representative of a USAID contracting agency shared the following feedback after having read the FES report, and following extensive discussions on the subject:

[The data] definitely resonated with the experiences, difficulties and challenges I have faced in my work. I felt myself nodding in agreement in various places throughout the report. I think you managed to fairly represent what was happening, and how it differed from what people, both national and international, felt should be happening. I especially liked your point about the lessons learned but not applied - I think that is definitely true. When I started the micro-enterprise program, we planned to include men in the training, however for various reasons that did not happen. I think it is a weakness in our program that I hope will be addressed in the future. Taking more time to create and plan for both the technical and logistical aspects of program implementation would help improve the impact, but we need to work more with our donors to ensure we have the space to do so.

I very much agree that 'gender' has really meant 'women' in terms of programs. The concept of gender, and creating gender equality or equity seems difficult to relate to this environment and cultural context. It seems like it just gets confused with women's issues and rights, and is perceived to be favoritism to women. Even though my staff understand that gender is about both men and women, in our work it is hard to translate that into effective inclusion of men.

We had an interesting meeting with the Chancellor of the Nangarhar University the other day. We were talking about some of our programs for women, and he was very upset that we were setting a bad example by creating segregated programs that would favor women. He encouraged us to not leave out the boys. It was unclear whether he just wanted to make sure the men had more opportunities, or if he genuinely felt that there should be more equal interaction. My immediate reaction was that he didn't want the boys to be excluded from opportunities for them to be making money, but I also think it may provide a good opportunity to encourage that kind of mixing at the university - if it can be done appropriately in a way that both girls and boys are comfortable.

I find the lack of contextualized analysis to be very true among the international staff. Early after I arrived I actually read a book about women and politics and development in Afghanistan that clearly outlined how difficult it has been to make

change in the past, and how negative the reaction was by the Afghans when they felt the changes were being imposed too quickly. It really made me aware of the need to work within the culture and to expect slow change, and only when it was initiated by the community. However, our donor, USAID, requires more immediate outputs and numbers. So even knowing the history, I often feel that we have to push things a little bit to meet the requirements of our donor. That often means that our monitoring is at a very superficial level - so many women trained, so much money disbursed - and thus does not reflect any potential meaningful change that will continue after our program ends.

There is also a lot of frustration by the men that they cannot find work, which I think leads to resentment when their wives are selected for training. Women around the world struggle with the issues that arise when their husbands earn less, are not working, or feel otherwise inferior - it is not unique to Afghanistan. However, here there are much more violent repercussions against women as the resentment by individual men feeds into a larger group within a cultural context where women are supposed to be taken care of, not supporting the family, and where the culture allows for much more violence in general, and specifically against women. In a gender training that we held for our own staff the men commented that they would have no problem with women working, as long as jobs for all the men were found first.

An Afghanistan and gender specialist had the following to say on the concern that the term 'gender' has become conflated with 'women':

I have found when interviewing and talking with international aid workers about gender mainstreaming that that really means mainstreaming women into various projects and programs. Why can't we just say mainstreaming women? Gender mainstreaming seems misleading.

Gender is a Western concept for sure... but also note that it is also a flexible, overused, and misused term in the West as well. Perhaps addressing issues of masculinity and femininity in both the local and international context would make

more sense. Also for example U.S./Western conceptions of femininity and being a successful female in society vary greatly from Afghan conceptions of womanhood, femininity and the success of a woman in society - even in the public sphere. Conceptions of gender when implemented as a focus of aid - this is what I getting from your study - bring with them all of the complicated and contradictory definitions of gender within a Western context and then try to map that onto local/Afghan context without a clear and consistent understanding of that context and how much it has shifted/been altered by war, conflict, and dramatic changes in gender norms, codes, and expected behavior for men in women in various social, political and family contexts. [In addition to the neglect of men, there is also] the neglect of the family and family relationships as a central focus of Afghan life for both men and women.

There have been several local indigenous movements towards women's rights: the women's party, RAWA, locally based women's NGOs, women's operations of secret schools, and facilities for women both during the civil war and Taliban. There have been women consistently working on altering the social and political fabric of their lives, and they need assistance. But it seems that no one or very few of those in international gender development are seeking out these existing relationships because they have their own agendas or programs or ways of "doing gender".

She also shared with me an email that she received on 14 July 2006 in response to her request for information on Afghan women's leadership. The author is a long-time Afghanistan specialist and analyst, and was also a participant in my study:

Special plea: Take it easy, at least publicly, on "Afghan women's leadership." The whole country is on the brink of collapse in a manner not altogether unlike what happened in the late 1920s and late 1980s. Karzai's a spent force, if he was ever one domestically in the first place, and the main attack comes from ultra-conservatives. I worry that post-9/11 gains for Afghan women could be reversed as happened after the fall of Amanullah and then Najibullah. Foregrounding women's issues at the moment risks severe backlash.

Afghan Voices

An Afghan activist and leader of an NGO for women said the following:

> *This study is quite valid especially for the international aid players in Afghanistan but I hope that they learned from the lessons that you remind them. From my point of view, lack of a clear agenda and appointing of unprofessional staff for the position of experts in Afghanistan caused that only women be considered gender in programs, therefore most people think that gender is empowerment of women. In Afghanistan, any word which is not part of the patriarchal terminology and is perceived as a Western term and [having Western] value - even if this word be part of other Islamic concepts and terminologies - still [Afghans] will considered strange and anti-culture and will not be accepted by the majority of people. Gender concept is always a strange concept for the Afghan patriarchal society. And, there is no interest in understanding these things about Afghanistan. This is a fact, and I think the international communities/aid organizations are not interested to the fundamental social and political changes in Afghanistan otherwise they should already have passed the process of analyzing the social institutions and their backgrounds and histories for better ways to make changes. Backlash has resulted but we also should not expect that a great social change in values and norms in a traditional and patriarchal society be warmly welcomed by the society. But still for decreasing the backlashes we should have had strategic approaches. I am pro-positive discrimination and I think to balance the rights of men and women in Afghanistan for the first stages we need a huge campaign of empowering women but still with strategic approaches to prevent the backlash and violence against women.*

In a group discussion on the FES report, Afghan women NGO leaders who had been a part of the study had the following to say:

> Orzala: *People in Afghanistan - and especially the women in Afghanistan - were not given the time and space to sit a little bit and evaluate what they wanted to do. I can give you my own experience. I established an organization in January of*

1999. I started the organization by my own opportunities and possibilities. And I started this organization in an emergency context. And I remember very well from that day up until this time that I am talking to you, I am running, running, running... For people like me, and the majority of us, it's very important to be given some chances to look at what we're doing... In the West, people plan their year. Here we plan our day. We cannot look beyond the day. This causes lack of coordination and this causes why we just run behind opportunities. We don't have our own strategies. Unfortunately, we run after anything. There is no specific – I will say again - cultural-sensitive and context-specific strategy for this country, taking into account its culture and history and very specific situation. A strategy that can take into consideration men as well as women.

Indeed, this 'strategy' for women and men was an oft-repeated mantra, the absence of which was problematic for men and women alike. On a discussion on the neglect of men in aid interventions as a key to understanding possible increases in violence against women:

Fariba: *I do agree with you that to some extent this does create some problems and does increase violence against women. Just as an example - we established a computer course for girls, for girls from poor families. A free course. And then we were faced with boys. The boys came to us and they said "If your priority is really for poor families, I am also the son of a poor person, so why am I not counted?"*

Najia: *Again I want to come back to this fact of positive discrimination. I think there is a need for positive discrimination for women. When we say that it should be gender-sensitive and only focusing on women, perhaps the reason why it is too much focused on women is because the positive discrimination we think is important because of the difference in men's opportunity and women's opportunity. But we should never, ever forget men's participation. Because as soon as you forget men's participation this will not be balanced, but it will actually be worse. The balance will be totally broken.*

Orzala: *We don't want to have educated and professional women and yet illiterate men. At the same time it should be equal.*

Roya: *if you say that being gender sensitive and the aid we get for it, perpetuates sensitivity of men toward this issue and perpetuates VAW more, I would say that I agree exactly in what Orzala said in that perspective... It is true that men are getting uneasy about it and thinking that 'Uh Oh! This gender focus is not going well'. Violence increases when people don't have opportunities. It happens everywhere in the world, not just Afghanistan. But in Afghanistan and other third world countries, the women tend to be more domestic. That is the difference. So if they are not given an opportunity to work outside or earn their money, it's not affecting them as much as it would affect a man. And when a woman gets that opportunity and a man doesn't, he becomes frustrated. That is true. And I think it would be true all over the world, not only Afghanistan. Because he cannot work and the woman does. It is a natural thing... or rather let me say that it is a "nurture-al" thing that men have the ego and sense of being in power and controlling. So when they see this, they feel that they lose their confidence and they don't feel good about it. And this frustration certainly contributes to the violence against women.*

Laila: *Absolutely I think you are right. This is a pattern that we have seen everywhere in the world, and especially in most post-conflict countries, when men are in war and then there is no more war and what do they do? And they are very tense and frustrated and violent. They are influenced by the violence they have seen and they are unable to access economic opportunities and so they become increasingly frustrated. But what is different about Afghanistan from Bosnia and other cases is that yes, probably violence against women has increased for those kinds of reasons. But we can't even begin to say that we can prove it. There are no numbers at all. We can't show numbers to demonstrate this, to prove that this is really the case. The only thing we can go by are people's stories, which I think to me are much more powerful than the numbers anyway. It's the stories of the individual women that are a good measure. That's how I would measure. So the difference here from a Bosnia, for example, is that there was such a high profile*

placed on women and the intervention on behalf of women that disrupted the social dynamic in the house. What I heard over and over again is that "if there is no training for my husband, I can't come here. If there is no job for my brother, I can't keep coming here to this center. I can't do this anymore". And very often they said that they would prefer that he works, and not her. But everything was coming for her and not for him. So when you come in as a development organization and you don't know how things work in Afghanistan, how Afghans think... and you put women on one side and men on the other side, like cattle. And you distribute benefits unequally, that's not a very smart thing to do.

A Final 'Gender' Meeting

In summer 2006, a large meeting of gender and women's groups and interested individuals was convened in Kabul, Afghanistan. The purpose, according to the organizer, was "to bring together an inclusive and diverse group of people who share a deep interest and commitment to creating and understanding gender issues in Afghanistan"[232]. In a discussion with the organizer, she explained that it was the FES Lessons Learned report that inspired her to form this group and initiate this meeting.

An email group was created prior to the meeting, and the discussion of the agenda yielded many interesting comments, such as the following, taken directly from emails received as part of the discussion[233]:

- There are many well-meaning initiatives, but few of these seem sustainable.
- We had a lot of gender meetings in the past.
- Gender mainstreaming and economic empowerment for women of Afghanistan... is not as easy and simple like people think.
- "Gender" is a big topic and it may be difficult to hold a comprehensive gathering that would be useful to everybody over a protracted period of time.
- What is sometimes rather destructive is the tendency for a number of the women's groups to engage in politics or turf-wars, international and national both.

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[232] As per a personal email I received from the organizer.
[233] Personal email communications, May-June 2006.

- Development agents often pose a barrier to progress in that they take on all the responsibility and decision making forgetting to pass the baton to the "developees"... giving up control is not easy to do... allowing people to make mistakes in your presence is even harder... it is so much easier to just tell people what to do!!
- I think that the current and seemingly deteriorating situation in Afghanistan makes the gender discussion even more critical. We do so much relatively high profile work with women, I've begun to be concerned about what kind of negative attention we could be in for in the future.
- After the terrible incident last week, when three female Action Aid staff were killed in Jawzjan, we probably have to rethink gender and how we understand and facilitate it in the communities.
- In doing gender work in areas of high insecurity, am I jeopardizing the women that I work with?

On 27 June 2006, approximately 60 women (Afghan and non-Afghan), and three men, met in an attempt to revive the 'gender discussion' in Afghanistan. The organizer introduced the meeting by announcing "we are all here because of Lina". She explained that she initiated the meeting based on the FES report. In so doing, this can be viewed as a further attempt to close the feedback loop and to build constructively on the findings of the report. The first debate ensued over a lack of accurate translation and definition of the term gender in Dari and Pashto. The translator – a man – had been using the term *jinsiyat* in place of gender. As previously addressed in Chapter IV, this Dari term is used to mean "sexuality". This presents a good example of a basic issue that has yet to be resolved.

I participated in the thematic working groups called "Post-Conflict and Negative Attention", comprised of representatives from two international NGOs, one large international agency, and two Afghan NGOs. The discussion centered around a debate on what would be appropriate approaches to ensuring community acceptance in Afghanistan. Participants agreed that there were some fundamental flaws in the aid apparatus, starting with a resistance to genuine promotion of gender issues on the part of aid institutions. The lack of coordination, funding difficulties, short-term focus, and desire for 'quick-fix solutions' were also cited as problems.

The group raised the importance of understanding people's perceptions and the impact of rhetoric, particularly that stemming from the US discourse of 'liberation' that animated interventions in Afghanistan. Such language is problematic, it was agreed. It raises expectations and results in unmet promises and disillusioned people. Further, it comes with the assumption that a 'savior' is going to 'deliver liberation'. One woman continued that "we were not at all prepared to deliver on what we're saying, and if we don't, we are creating new tensions". This rhetoric may have stemmed from a particular discourse, but it was heard by all, particularly Afghans. As a result, a 'rhetoric fatigue' has set in, coupled with a renewed dislike for 'foreign occupation' that brings its own short-lived enthusiasms for alien ideologies.

Afghan participants in the working group felt that it was a convenient excuse to blame 'Afghan culture' for resistance to gender-focused approaches, but this only reflected a failure in the apparatus to adequately understand Afghan society. One participant put it this way: "We don't spend enough time understanding. We need to build trust, we didn't do that. Go back to history and see what went wrong. They went out aggressively to bring reform with women, whatever regime it is – Soviet, American, and so on". The group emphasized the importance of understanding Afghan history and the ways in which social change has been resisted and received. A contextualized analysis, one Afghan woman explained, could have revealed that in the 1920s, for instance, the 'women's issue' brought down a monarchy, resulting in many years of silence and regressions in terms of women's rights. This was the result of an aggressive program for social change led by an urban minority with little relation to the rural communities. She elaborated that "we need a more in-depth analysis and we need to look at what we're doing and turn it around before a backlash becomes inevitable".

An analysis of Afghan contexts, members of the group explained, could have revealed the gaps and errors in our assumptions. One Afghan woman explained that the aid apparatus assumes that Afghan women's voices are not heard, "but maybe they are not heard by *us*". The few voices that might be heard are not the ones that are representative of women in Afghanistan. She advocated a more thorough understanding of Afghan culture and society before starting operations, including knowledge of power and decision-making structures in the home. In so doing, efforts for 'empowerment' could be better

guided and not destabilize the family. Indeed, the pervasive feeling in the group was that in these last four years, the aid apparatus has nearly failed Afghan women. It started with flawed policies, and continued to accumulate flaws from there. One woman elaborated: "It was clear that the policy that was set for the US to free Afghanistan was to 'liberate' Afghan women from the *bourka*. No Afghan is going to align themselves with that".

The Afghan woman continued: "I've been pushed a lot to work with women and women only but you can't work with just women. The more you work with women the more the men get annoyed". Participants reported that, in their organizations, Afghan male staff felt strongly that men's needs should be met first. "Find jobs for men first and then we'll talk about women," said one man in Jalalabad. It was agreed that the discourse employed for the gender agenda has become pervasive – and contagious. Even men use the language of 'gender' and 'empowerment', no matter what they really believe, one woman said. "They think it's what we need to hear".

And yet there are repercussions. "Why are girls' schools being burned? Are we facing a situation that is creating new tensions?" one woman asked. There is a backlash, another woman explained, to what we – the aid apparatus – believed was the appropriate response to the 'gender and women issue'. It was agreed that this environment never was post-conflict – firstly because the tensions never really subsided, and now "because new tensions have been created".

In one of the workshops convened to share findings of the FES report, a discussion of so-called women's leadership programs ensued. This was part of the language that followed the recent intervention trends that have moved from income generation to rights to leadership, amongst other short-lived aid fads. These shifts generally occur faster than many institutions can follow, and certainly too fast for participants, leaving Afghan men and women no time to consider their roles in the process and no opportunities to set the direction of the interventions. One Afghan woman specialist had the following to say:

> *The title ['women's leadership programs'] itself creates so much resentment. Gender relations in Afghanistan are complementary and not juxtaposed men against women. This juxtaposition from aid agencies reflects individual rights and a*

Western capitalist context. This isn't applicable in Afghanistan because traditionally there is coexistence.

In an electronic discussion with select gender specialists in Afghanistan, a discussion ensued about how to discuss 'the women's issue' with members of the Dutch Parliament who had expressed interest and made inquiries. One of the non-Afghan specialists expressed her sentiments this way:

There have been reports that women themselves are not happy about having so much focus upon them, numerous women's projects, freedom from the bourka, etc. Although, of course, they need so much, focusing exclusively on women is sometimes having a negative effect... The kind of negative effects can be, for example, upsetting the dynamic within communities by giving more to women than men who are also very needy causing tensions. Women themselves feel uncomfortable about this.

In an electronic discussion group on *The Struggle for Women's Rights at Home and Abroad*, one member – an American woman and women's rights activist - had the following to say about the situation of women in Afghanistan after having read the FES report:

Sadly, what we've seen is that US rhetoric on "liberating Afghan women" was completely devoid of substance. We saw this from the beginning with the willingness of the US to cooperate with the Mujahideen groups whose gender ideology was just as restrictive as the Taliban's. Reports from Afghanistan are uniformly bad on women's rights issues; violence against women is still common and women are still being intimidated out of participating in public life. In my opinion, the Bush administration used Afghan women – used them by focusing on their real suffering under the Taliban to get what they wanted (support for US military action against Afghanistan), and then never putting in any real effort towards improving their lives. You ask if there have been any unexpected outcomes – I'm sorry to say that I expected this outcome from the beginning.

Lessons Learned?

The following appeared in the FES report in a discussion of lessons that have *not* been learned[234]:

> *'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 explanations 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 the FES 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[235]. 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 and 2006 as lessons-to-be-learned:*

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[234] The full text can be found at Abirafeh, L. (2005). Lessons from Gender-focused International Aid in Post-Conflict Afghanistan... Learned? Gender in International Cooperation. F. E. Stiftung. Bonn, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

[235] Adapted from UN Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality, OECD/DAC Network on Gender Equality, et al. (2003). Gender and Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Lessons Learned from Afghanistan. Gender and Post-Conflict Reconstruction: Lessons Learned from Afghanistan, Paris.

- *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*
- *Recognize that any aid intervention in the aftermath must guard against "unintended negative consequences for women" (2003: 19).*

The report argues to engage men, appreciate the cultural and historical context, and work with existing, indigenous human rights efforts (2003: vii). On the subject of context, the report urged that interventions recognize the variety of both women's and men's historical and cultural identities and their responses to change (2003: 11). Georg Frerks, Head of the Conflict Research Unit at the Clingendael Institute in the Netherlands, had this to say during his panel presentation for the report:

> *[Development work in the aftermath suffers] from a reductionist view of gender, focusing mainly on women and women's roles... Most policy approaches also ignore how processes of "gendering" work in reality and how... policies or projects in everyday life get "gendered".*
> *(2003: 91)*

Upon finding this report, I was nearing completion of my Lessons-not-Learned report. Again, one year later, the same lessons apply.

Appendix 7: Publications and Presentations

Publications

- "Freedom is Only Won From the Inside: Domestic Violence in Post-Conflict Afghanistan" Chapter of edited book Change from Within: Diverse Perspectives on Domestic Violence in Muslim Communities. July 2007. http://www.peacefulfamilies.org/abirafeh.html
- "Women in Afghanistan" Afghanistan Lonely Planet. July 2007.
- "Women in Afghanistan: Discourses of Social Change" (title TBD) Chapter of edited book on War and Muslim Women (title TBD). March 2007.
- "Gender Dynamics, Increased Insecurities, and the Backlash: Afghanistan Five Years Later" Der Ueberblick (German journal of international affairs). November 2006.
- "The Gender Agenda: Where Do Men Fit?" Chapter of edited book on Afghanistan (title TBD). October 2006.
- Women, Gender and Non-Governmental Organizations: Afghanistan and Women, Gender and Sustainable Development: Afghanistan entries for Encyclopedia of Women and Islamic Cultures (EWIC), Brill Academic Publishers. Winter 2006.
- Book Review for "Afghanistan: The Mirage of Peace" Nations and Nationalism. Volume 12. Issue 1. February 2006.
- "From Afghanistan to Sudan: How Peace Risks Marginalizing Women" Forced Migration Review. November 2005. http://www.fmreview.org/FMRpdfs/FMR24/FMR2425.pdf
- "Lessons from Gender-focused International Aid in Post-Conflict Afghanistan... Learned?" Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Report. September 2005. http://www.fes.org.af/AFGHANISTAN0905ABIRAFEHGENDER.pdf.
- "Afghan Journal" International Report, Arabian Woman Magazine. March 2005.
- "A Small Twist of Fate" Zenda - Alive, ArtSpace. February 2005.
- "Burqa Politics: The Plights of Women in Afghanistan" Chronogram Special Report, Chronogram Magazine. October 2004. http://www.chronogram.com/issue/2004/10/news/burqa.php
- "Women in Afghanistan" Central Asia Lonely Planet. October 2004.
- "More Free, But No Less Poor" The Script: Journal of the LSE Students' Union. Vol. 3, Issue 2. May 2004. http://www.stkw.nl/thescript/archive/vol3/issue2/9.html
- "Women in Afghanistan: Response to Violence Against Women" Human Rights Dialogue, Carnegie Council on International Affairs. Series 2, No. 11. Spring 2004.
- "Women in Afghanistan" Project Spera Newsletter. January 2004. http://www.projectspera.org/January%202004%20Newsletter%20(HTML).htm#Author
- "The Role of Religion in the Lives of Women in the New Afghanistan" Critical Half. Vol. 1, No. 1. 2003.

Presentations

- Women's Agency in Conflict: Voices of Men and Women. Feminism and War Conference. Syracuse, NY. October 2006.
- Issues in Human Development. Center for the Global South. American University. Washington, DC. October 2006.
- Examining the effects of gender-focused international aid in conflict and post-conflict contexts. Society for International Development, Women in Development. Washington, DC. October 2006.
- The Cyclical Nature of Conflict/Post-Conflict. Co-hosted by Net Impact, Georgetown Women in Business and the Emerging Markets Network. Georgetown University. Washington, DC. October 2006.
- Supporting Women Entrepreneurs in Afghanistan. Co-hosted by Net Impact, Georgetown Women in Business and the Emerging Markets Network. Georgetown University. Washington, DC. March 2006.
- The International Feminist Community and its Impact on Women Worldwide: The Afghan Experience. Women as Global Leaders International Conference. Dubai, UAE. March 2006.
- On *Lessons Learned*: Release of the FES Report. How Does Change Happen? AWID International Forum on Women's Rights and Development. Bangkok, Thailand. October 2005.
- Women and Elections in Afghanistan. OSCE Observer Delegation, Afghanistan. September 2005.
- Networking and Political Participation. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) Young Leaders Forum, Afghanistan. September 2005.
- Why Politics? Roqia Center for Women, Afghanistan. September 2005.
- Progress Report: Women and Elections. Advisory Group on Gender, Ministry of Women's Affairs, Afghanistan. August 2005.
- Gender and Elections. Weekly press briefings for groups of international journalists, Afghanistan. July-August 2005.
- Women's Political Participation. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) "Conference on Women's Human Rights in Political and General Life", Afghanistan. 16 July 2005.
- Lessons Learned in Gender and Development in Post-Conflict Contexts. American University of Sharjah (AUS) Medina Forum Lecture Series, UAE. May 2005.
- Supporting Women's Leadership: Strategies and Challenges. Women as Global Leaders International Conference. Dubai, UAE. March 2005.
- Images of Afghanistan. ArtSpace Gallery. Dubai, UAE. February 2005.
- Women and Reconstruction in Afghanistan: Perspectives and Outlooks. Soroptimist International – Germany. Bad Wildungen, Germany. September 2004.
- Afghan Women One Year Later. Women for Women International. Washington, DC. June 2003.
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- What Next for Afghan Women? World Bank Development Gateway. Washington, DC. May 2003.
- Women for Women's work and Rights Awareness Training: Why It Is Unique in Afghanistan. World Food Programme. Kabul, Afghanistan. March 2003.

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- The Role of Information and Communications Technologies in the Lives of Afghan Women. Empowering the Poor Through Rural Information Telecentres. The World Bank. Washington, DC. December 2002.
- Women's NGOs and NGO-Government Collaboration. Ministry of Planning of the Transitional State of Afghanistan. Kabul, Afghanistan. November 2002.

Appendix 8: Dari Terminology

Dari Word	English Definition
Afghaniyat	Afghan national identity
Akl	Responsibility
Bad	Offering women as brides in reparation for offenses
Badal	Offering women as brides in exchange for another bride
B'aman Khoda	Go with God's hope
Bi-namoos	Without chastity
Bourka/Burqa	Full body covering for women
Chador	Women's veil
Chaddori	Full body covering for women
Dari	Persian dialect spoken in Afghanistan
Farsi	Persian language
Ghayrat	Right to defend one's honor by force
Gozargah	Transition, juncture
Hijab	Women's veil
Imam	One who leads prayers, also head of Islamic community
Jihad	Holy war
Jirga	Tribal council
Jinsiyat	Sexuality
Kash-ma-kash	Conflict
Khan	Man of influence
Kharab	Bad
Khariji	Foreigner
Khshoonat aley-he zanaan	Domestic violence
Kuchi	Nomad
Landay	Short poem
Loya Jirga	Grand Assembly
Madrasa	Religious school
Mahram	Close male relative with whom women are allowed to have contact
Mamus	Men's duty to protect and respect women
Masjid	Mosque
Mujahid	Fighter in the holy war
Mujahideen	(plural)
Mullah	Religious official of small community
Namaz	Prayer
Namoos	Pride
Nang	Honor
Nar-shedza	Man-woman
Nezaa	Fighting
Nufus-dar	Having people, belonging
Pashto	Language spoken in Afghanistan
Pashtun	Afghan ethnic group, Pashto speakers
Pashtunwali	Pashtun tribal code

Purdah	Restricted movements for women
Qawm	Collective units based on dependents
Rish-safed	Elder, "white beard"
Shabnam	Night letters
Shah	Sovereign, ruler
Shahid	Martyr, one who dies in the Jihad
Shaikh	Man of religion
Shariat	Islamic law
Shura	Consultative council
Talib	Student of religion
Taliban	(plural)
Tarsidah	Fear
Tashadud	Violence
Tashadud aley-he zanaan	Violence against women
Wasita	Having special contacts and access
Watan	Fatherland, nation
Wolesi Jirga	House of the People
Zan	Woman
Zanaan	Women

Appendix 9: Acronyms and Abbreviations

ACBAR	Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief
AGG	Advisory Group on Gender
AIHRC	Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission
ANDS	Afghanistan National Development Strategy
ANSO	Afghan NGO Security Office
APIF	Afghanistan Project Implementation Facility
AREU	Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit
AWID	Association for Women's Rights in Development
BFPA	Beijing Platform for Action
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CGA	Country Gender Assessment
CSO	Civil Society Organization
FES	Friedrich Ebert Stiftung
GAD	Gender and Development
GAG	Gender Advisory Group
GEM	Gender Empowerment Measure
GoA	Government of Afghanistan
GSG	Gender Sector Group
HDI	Human Development Index
HDR	Human Development Report
I-ANDS	Interim Afghanistan National Development Strategy
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
JEMBS	Joint Electoral Management Body Secretariat
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MoWA	Ministry of Women's Affairs
NAPWA	National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan
NDF	National Development Framework
NDI	National Democratic Institute
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NSP	National Solidarity Programme
OTI	Office of Transitional Initiatives

PDPA	People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan
PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
RAWA	Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan
RefWID	Refugee Women in Development
RERO	Regional External Relations Officer
SAF	Securing Afghanistan's Future
TSS	Transitional Support Strategy
UN	United Nations
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
UNOPS	United Nations Office for Project Services
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WB	World Bank
WDC	Women's Development Center
WID	Women in Development
WRC	Women's Resource Center

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