

An Opportunity  
Lost? Engaging  
Men in Gendered  
Interventions:  
Voices from  
Afghanistan

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Introduction

A contextualised analysis of gender contributes to greater relevance in gender-focused aid interventions. In conflict and the aftermath, this type of analysis can be used as a tool to mitigate violence and support development. The experience in Afghanistan – a prominent aid intervention with a high-profile focus on gender (at the level of rhetoric) and women (in practice) – demonstrates that gender initiatives that lack men’s engagement will likely not achieve gender equality and fail to achieve the ultimate goals of poverty alleviation and sustainable development.

Data collected for PhD research<sup>1</sup> between 2002 and 2006 on gendered interventions in Afghanistan reveals that the particular focus on women in Afghanistan (perhaps more so than other post-conflict contexts) has actually been detrimental from the perspective of Afghan men and women. Anecdotal evidence gathered in the course of study shows that the neglect of men in aid interventions has contributed to a resurgence of violence both at the household level against women and at the national level against the international community. It is possible to link the current increases in violence in Afghanistan at least in part to an insufficient understanding of men’s needs and roles in Afghan society. Well-designed gender-focused aid activities are an essential

tool to prevent a resurgence of violence and to facilitate the transition from conflict/post-conflict to a genuine and sustainable peace.

A socially and historically informed analysis can guide aid agencies 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. In order to be sustainable, processes of social change must come from within.

Men Neglected

The haste of actors in the interventions in the aftermath of conflict and the hype surrounding Afghan women prevented many agencies from taking the time to learn about the Afghan social order. Most of the men interviewed expressed uncertainty about their new roles and of feeling displaced or sidelined by their perceived neglect. Men argued repeatedly that women were prioritised through international influence and received a disproportionate share of support, opportunities and benefits. One man explained that ‘since the Americans came’, he felt that the only way to provide for the family was for his wife to work. He could not find a job because ‘women are preferred over men’. Men recognise that changes in gender roles and relations have always been the result of highly politicised projects in Afghanistan. These changes have become a highly contested cultural terrain and impact security in the country.

Women interviewed agreed that men had been neglected and that they had good cause to be angry as a result. Women were not comfortable with the perceived imbalance as it did not reflect their own priorities. Their preference was for their own traditional structure, entailing clear roles and shared resources and responsibilities. However, women complained that this no longer seemed possible because of strong

political pressure driven by international agendas. A woman elaborated: '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 dangerous outcome of 'talking gender' and 'doing women' is that it fuels men's perception that gender is a negative word that denotes women's power over men. In conversations with Afghan women for this research, many felt that there was room to work in partnership with men in the contexts of the family and community. They felt that an opportunity to engage with potential male supporters and advocates had been lost.

### ***A Resurgence of Violence***

In Afghanistan, there are obvious reasons behind the resurgence of violence, including the neglect of security and the disregard of rule of law and governance. This is further compounded by the international community's support for warlords (some of whom now occupy seats in Parliament), perpetuating a culture of impunity. The continued increase of opium production also contributes to the criminalisation of large sectors of the economy. Afghans have all suffered from this. In some cases, this resurgence of violence also manifests itself as an increase in violence against women.

In this context, aid interventions are often conflated with radical social change without taking potential externalities such as increased violence into account. It can even be argued that in underestimating the complexities of this task, gender interventions have resulted in particular negative externalities. For example, the gender order is further destabilised as Afghan women feel misrepresented and as Afghan men perceive a challenge to their institutionalised patriarchy. This has resulted in violence against women as men defend the gender order when they find it challenged, particularly as a result of an externally imposed agenda of social change.

### ***Identities in Crisis***

Examining the social roles of both women and men in Afghanistan reveals a history of coexistence and a collective sense of identity. The combination of poverty and conflict has led to a loss of livelihoods. For men this manifests as an inability to fulfil their traditional role as providers. This in turn has led to their reduced self-esteem and sense of identity and finally to their marginalisation and disenfranchisement – one result of which is the increase in violence against women. These strategic and seemingly apolitical decisions of international interventions focusing on women send political messages that create negative impacts.

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. It is imperative, therefore, to understand the role of men as participants in interventions, and the possible negative effects for women when men do not participate. Gender equality is destined to fail unless men's lives are bettered along with women's lives – and for their own ends. Their involvement and support is needed to achieve gender equality. Gender frameworks are applied in a way that focuses on women and excludes men. This focus on women, coupled with a perceived exclusion of males, can result in a backlash against gains made in favour of women. Despite aid agencies' shift from women to gender, there is still little understanding of men's roles in gendered aid interventions, and how these are informed by historical constructs of masculinities.

Work on gender equality needs to be grounded in the local contexts and should take account of the processes of socialisation 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 to ground interventions in contexts that are understood. Reports and



myriad examples explain that men specifically are less resistant to changes when the changes are grounded in their own traditions. It is undoubtedly challenging working on advancing women's rights and on the 'gender agenda' in this context. In the light of the recent deterioration of the political and security situation in Afghanistan, gender actors now hesitate to push the agenda despite their belief that things could be done differently – and better – for Afghan women and men. The fear of a backlash is certainly one reason for caution.

### ***Dissatisfaction with Aid***

Interviews revealed a discontentment with the operations of aid agencies, and a sense that the social order has been disrupted in ways that have negative effects for women. Dissatisfaction was expressed over the following issues: excessive project focus on women; mismanaged or misdirected aid; and failure to deliver on promises and thus raised and unfulfilled expectations.

Many men expressed dissatisfaction with aid agencies that fail to understand 'Afghan culture' and 'are abusing women by disrespecting their role and religion'. One man said the United Nations was encouraging women to 'fight with their husbands for their rights. This is not correct.' Another elaborated: 'In the area of importing or bringing foreign culture and tradition, international organisations have a bad effect on Afghan women.'

Women also believed that their participation in interventions 'has created problems for women'. Some agencies, one explained, 'tried to change the way men think' and had failed. Offering opportunities only for women, said another, had 'just increased the gap between men and women'. Many interviewees felt that aid progress was limited and that promises had not been met; the little that had been achieved 'is only in a very symbolic way'. One forcefully expressed the belief that 'They have led one woman to a comfortable life and have led thousands of them to disaster.' The view was

frequently expressed that there was little new in discussions of the plight of women and 'the world does not want to know of Afghan women now'. As one said, 'I do not think the world cares about Afghanistan anymore. They are tired of saving them and now look elsewhere.' There was general agreement that aid agencies had entered Afghanistan with much fanfare, rearranged things, and made a swift exit.

### ***Agency denied***

Women interviewees generally felt misrepresented because of the pervasive view of aid agencies that they were victims in need of saving. Facile analyses of women as victims and men as perpetrators, they believed, served only to alienate those men who were supporters and who could be mobilised for women's participation. In this context, the *chaddari* came up repeatedly as the Western symbol for their perceived 'weakness' of Afghan women.<sup>2</sup> 'We don't want our men to be owned by anyone,' one woman stated. Many women felt solidarity with their men. One said, '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'. Men were not opposed to changes, 'as long as they are not against what Afghans want'; no one had asked the men what they want.

### ***The importance of honour***

Afghanistan is a traditional and patriarchal society in which the primary social unit is the family – the private sphere. The protection of society is reflected in the protection of women. Most Afghan women prefer to be viewed within the context of the family when targeted for assistance. Regardless, most gender interventions overlook this, actually provoking a retreat to more conservative measures. Afghan women felt very strongly about men's role as providers for the family, explaining the connection between this traditionally male responsibility and men's honour. Thus, many Afghan men – and women – view women's work as a sign of their absolute

poverty and destitution, an insult to men's dignity, and a questioning of men's ability to provide.

Women preferred that the men be responsible for working and providing for the household and controlling the domestic resources. In short, a man with honour is one who is able to provide for his family; a man without work has no honour. 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.'

### **Violence towards Women: A Backlash**

Space created for women may bring resentment and a backlash, manifesting in a shift from public to private violence. It is not unusual for men to use violence against women as a means of establishing and maintaining power relationships and structural inequalities. One strategy for safeguarding the present gender order is to employ violence against women. Most of the discussions on violence for this research centered on men's frustrations and inabilities to access opportunities. Women saw this as an explanation for an upsurge of the violence that was directed towards them. Furthermore, campaigns for women's rights run the risk of being undermined because they create a perception that foreign ideologies are being imported and imposed on women. Violence against women in Afghanistan should be viewed as part of a larger landscape that has been shaped by Afghan history. In so doing, it becomes clear that this new and intensified violence could constitute a backlash against women.

Presenting aid interventions as focusing on women and failing to take gender dimensions into account may also build resentment against the international community and gendered interventions. It is possible to target women with a special focus that rectifies imbalances and addresses women-specific issues without marginalising men. Men's engagement as participants – and eventually as advocates

and supporters – works to benefit both women and men.

### **Policy Implications and Recommendations**

These recommendations are based on an analysis of the perceptions and experiences of the Afghan women and men interviewed. Lessons learned in Afghanistan are relevant to other post-conflict contexts and also other developing contexts where gender issues form a part of the development agenda.

*Social change is indigenous:* Shifts in the gender order are largely indigenous; they can be supported or hindered by external interventions. While women may benefit from the increased emphasis placed on them by aid agencies, men tend to feel emasculated as a result. Failing to take Afghan gender dynamics into consideration is increasing social tensions. Advancing an Afghan human rights agenda – as opposed to an allegedly Western women's rights agenda – should recognise and build upon the progress that Afghan women's groups are making.

*View violence in context:* Any effort to combat gender-based violence should approach the issue from a perspective of preventing social violence. In post-conflict Afghanistan, the need to improve security continues to be the greatest challenge – and failure – of the international community. An examination of violence in context needs to look at the culture of violence – and why it is escalating – as opposed to highlighting specific male acts of violence. Viewing violence in context also entails an understanding that neither Islam nor Afghan cultures and traditions condone violence. Instead, these can be used as a vehicle for peace by building on indigenous movements and preferred paces of social change.

*Recognise that gender includes men:* Aid interventions – whether or not they are labelled gender programmes – should examine their potential effects on men. A robust gender perspective should be





applied to men in conflict and the aftermath, with a particular focus on men and masculinity. A greater crisis of masculinity is likely to 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.

*Use a contextualised analysis:* Afghan history demonstrates that foreign interventions – particularly those perceived to be counter to Islam – are destined to fail. Gender issues have been highly politicised in Afghanistan, and aid and gender interventions should view change within an Islamic context, particularly at a time when the relationship between Islam and gender appears to be under scrutiny in the West.

*Operate within the family and community:* Gender interventions can advance if work is done within the context of the family and community. This begins firstly with an understanding of social roles and a recognition of what Afghans think should happen in order to better their lives. A likely outcome of promoting partnership and engaging both men and women in interventions is that men might be mobilised to act as agents of change.

*Use economic entry points:* Economic interventions are a good entry point for engaging men and families and can serve as an avenue to raise other issues. Achieving economic stability first is likely to make men more receptive to other discussions. It is useful to examine this by addressing practical needs and strategic interests. Meeting men's practical needs can actually result in strategic gains for both men and women.

*Pay special attention to young males:* Male youth merit particular focus because they are the next generation of leaders. Their suffering is acute because their experience has been exclusively one of war. Leisure activities – such as sports – are good vehicles to reach this group. Promoting good role models and using effective messengers produce champions for change.

*Encourage male-female dialogue:* Men should be engaged not only to advance women's interests. There is much that men can gain from gender interventions. The focus should not be on minimising violence against women, but on engaging men and women as partners in everyday activities in order to enlist their support in aid and gender interventions and to isolate those who do not support a contextualised equality. Promoting work in partnership stimulates and encourages dialogue between men and women.

*Monitor, evaluate and adjust:* As an emerging field, gender interventions involving men need better monitoring and evaluation, and an ability to be flexible and adjust programmes in order to meet changing needs. The trend to work with men is bound to increase; there should be ongoing support to eliminate or manage unforeseen externalities, ongoing dialogue with men and women, and close measures of qualitative changes in their lives. Gender and aid interventions need to be conscious of new vulnerabilities that might inadvertently be created.

*Engage the public sector:* Men at all levels need to be involved in aid and gender interventions. This extends beyond men in communities as participants and beneficiaries, to men in government structures, police and military, social services, and traditional religious and legal structures. There are men in these institutions who are already champions and who can help to make advances within their communities and contexts.

*Demonstrate commitment with funding:* Processes of social change are not one-off and quick-fix solutions. They require long-term commitments, patience and access to flexible resources that span several years. It is particularly dangerous to employ gender rhetoric and then fail to match it with funding. This raises expectations of change and increases frustrations when these promises are not met. The link between unmet promises and violence is obvious.

*Recognise the significance of perceptions:* Relative success – or failure – of aid and gender interventions should be measured by the perceptions and experiences of the participants. In this regard, evidence emerging from previous interventions is less than positive. According to Afghan perceptions, aid agencies ‘took sides’ – with women, and therefore against men – in trying to restructure the gender order and to engineer social transformation. Success cannot be measured in quantifiable terms. If participants see the work as failed, then that is how it should be judged.

*Address gender issues within agencies:* It is difficult to promote gender equality when most aid agencies are headed by men and most gender programmes are staffed by women. For a start, gender training should be conducted in aid agencies for staff at all levels, including senior management, and Afghan and international staff – men and women – should all work together. Promoting gender-equitable institutional cultures, practices and policies represents a commitment to gender equality at all levels, not just within so-called gender interventions. Furthermore, male staff need to be engaged in gender issues in order to reach out to men.

*Transmit the right message:* Instead of the perception that Afghan men are perpetrators of women’s oppression, aid agencies should transmit messages that men are valued partners and participants. Men can work with women to advance development goals, strengthening men’s resistance to violence and conflict, encouraging men’s positive engagement in families and communities, and including them as partners against social and political violence – and ultimately against gender-based violence.

*Manage gender rhetoric:* Transmitting the right message also entails managing gender rhetoric. It would be dangerous to overcompensate for previous neglect of men by re-employing the ‘women-in-development’ rhetoric of the 1980s. Given

aid agencies’ susceptibility to trends and buzzwords, extra care should be taken to present a balanced and rhetoric-free perspective. Too much emphasis on ‘involving the men’ could have adverse effects. The journey from ‘women-in-development’ to ‘gender-and-development’ should not result in a ‘men-in-development’ focus. The idea should be to re-engage ‘gender-and-development’ with a more robust definition of gender.

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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> This study builds on four years of work experience as well as dissertation research with gender actors and Afghan men and women. This study was conducted through the lens of both an international aid worker and an academic. Research in Afghanistan incorporates first-hand sources as well as documents, articles and reports collected since 2002. Much of the data has been gathered for a dissertation examining the effects of gender-focused international aid on women and men in post-conflict Afghanistan. Data collection consisted of interviews, questionnaires and focus group discussions in Kabul with gender actors. The bulk of the data emerges from interviews with 71 Afghan women who are participants in aid interventions and 50 Afghan men. All names have been withheld or changed.

<sup>2</sup> The *chaddari* is the full body covering worn by women in Afghanistan. It is also known as *bourka*.

