



## Supporting women's movements in Afghanistan: challenges of activism in a fragile context

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## Supporting women's movements in Afghanistan: challenges of activism in a fragile context

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### ABSTRACT

A range of international development and humanitarian actors have aimed to support women's rights in Afghanistan, from a variety of different policy perspectives. Support has tended to focus on government and state structures, but this top-down approach has had a very limited impact on the lives of women. Progress has been held up by a range of factors familiar in fragile contexts. This article draws on the perspectives of three organisations and a range of other activists, to explore how international actors can help to anchor and build on gains made so far. In particular, they need to work in partnership with Afghan women themselves and their movements.

Un conjunto de actores vinculados al trabajo humanitario y de desarrollo internacional ha intentado promover los derechos de las mujeres en Afganistán partiendo de varias perspectivas políticas diferentes. Generalmente, el apoyo en este sentido se ha centrado en estructuras gubernamentales y del Estado; sin embargo, como se trata de un enfoque vertical, ha producido un impacto muy limitado en la vida de las mujeres. Los avances se han visto obstaculizados por varios factores que suelen presentarse en contextos frágiles. El presente artículo se sustenta en las perspectivas de tres organizaciones y de varios activistas, y pretende examinar cómo los actores internacionales pueden afianzar los avances logrados hasta el momento y seguir construyendo a partir de ellos. En particular, la autora recomienda realizar el trabajo estableciendo alianza con las propias mujeres afganas y sus movimientos.

Une variété d'acteurs internationaux des secteurs du développement et humanitaire ont cherché à soutenir les droits des femmes en Afghanistan, ce de leurs différents points de vue en matière de politiques générales. Leur soutien a tendu à se concentrer sur les structures gouvernementales et étatiques, mais cette approche descendante a eu un impact très limité sur la vie des femmes. Les progrès ont été ralentis par un ensemble de facteurs familiers dans les contextes fragiles. Cet article s'inspire du point de vue de trois organisations et d'une variété d'autres activistes afin d'examiner la manière dont les acteurs internationaux peuvent contribuer à ancrer et à développer les gains obtenus jusqu'ici. Ils doivent en particulier travailler en partenariat avec les femmes afghanes elles-mêmes et leurs mouvements.

### KEYWORDS

Afghanistan; women's movements; power structures; social norms; NGO-isation; insecurity; religion

## Introduction: taking stock of gains made

States are fragile when state structures lack political will and/or capacity to provide the basic functions needed for poverty reduction, development and to safeguard the security and human rights of their populations. (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development/Development Assistance Committee definition of state fragility, in Bertoli and Ticci 2010, 3)

You should have freedom to speak a little bit. Even that is, for me, security. But in Afghanistan ... there is no security for you. Not only that bombing and killing, you are not secure from nothing here. Especially being a woman, from all sides. (Interview, Kabul, 21 March 2016)

In Afghanistan, women's rights have been at the centre of political and societal struggles for more than a hundred years, and have more than once played a key role in the overthrow of a government (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003). The ability and willingness of national governments to guarantee services – still more, rights – to women are the key concern of women's rights movements worldwide, and increasingly for international development and humanitarian actors.

Afghanistan's recent history is known globally. The Soviet intervention in 1979 marked the beginning of today 37 years of war between varying parties, fractions, and allies, from communist and pro-Soviet groups to different shades of resistance fighters including progressive, conservative, and fundamentalist Mujahidin, to the establishment of the Taliban regime. In 2001, following 9/11, a US-led intervention in co-operation with an alliance of Mujahidin groups swept away the Taliban government, and the successive international military and civil engagement has since shaped Afghan government politics and development efforts to a large degree (Barfield 2012).

Since 2001 and the fall of the Taliban government, Afghan women have been progressively able to be politically and socially active as ministers and parliamentarians, in the private sector and in civil society, and international humanitarian and development actors have integrated gender-equality concerns into their work. Some have explicitly funded and/or implemented projects for the betterment of women's situation in many ways. During this period, women's rights have been invoked by many to justify intervention in the country, and have been contested and supported by a wide range of different national and international actors in Afghanistan. These include humanitarian bodies, as well as longer-term development organisations. Policymakers and practitioners working to address the needs of populations within fragile states are currently considering how gender equality and women's rights can be integrated into policy discussions around fragility. Gender justice and women's rights should be seen as essential underpinnings to stable and sustainable peace and development. Assessing gains made and strategies used by women is an important step in determining future approaches to supporting development and peace in Afghanistan.

Since 2014, the international community has started withdrawing not only troops, but funding and engagement, and Afghan women's rights activists are taking stock of their efforts – and the efforts of the many disparate women's rights supporters in the international development community – over the last 15 years. What are the achievements and the gains made? What are the challenges seen by women's rights activists at this point? What strategies are useful in promoting women's rights?

To attempt to answer these questions, this article offers the views of women and men consulted in research with local non-government organisations (NGOs) and women's rights activists in Afghanistan. The overwhelming majority of my interview partners started their commitment to women's rights work long before 9/11, a fact that has often been overlooked by international actors. The article highlights a range of factors hampering the wider mobilisation around women's rights needed to achieve real gains at scale on women's rights in this fragile context where political and religious leaders wield power, and there is a significant gap between state policies and implementation. The research also highlights the technical and practical focus of much development work with women, and the fact that notions of fragile states and contexts tend to point policymakers to solutions at a policy level, and on social relief, when attention to power relations and social norms is required. A possible way forward is to be more aware of the diverse power struggles on socio-political levels and to focus attention on promoting change to social norms about women and gender power relations.

### The research: participants and organisations

Medica Afghanistan (MA) is a women's rights NGO that originally started off as a programme of the international women's rights NGO *medica mondiale* in 2002, and was nationalised in 2010 by its Afghan staff with international support. Apart from male support staff, it is run by a women-only team. Its focus lies on fighting violence against women through legal representation, mediation, psychosocial counselling, capacity building, and advocacy on the political and societal level.<sup>1</sup>

The NGO Afghan Women Skills Development Center (AWSDC) was founded by a group of Afghan women in Pakistan in 1999. It runs Women's Protection Centers in four provinces and focuses on protection of women survivors or at risk of violence, their economic empowerment, addressing sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) as a societal problem, and focusing on inclusion of women in peace-building on local levels, as well as undertaking advocacy on related issues. It developed a programme in Afghanistan in 2001, and has had links with international actors as donors and advocacy partners. Today the team is gender mixed.<sup>2</sup>

The third organisation I focus on in this article is the Solidarity Party of Afghanistan (SPA), a political party that was founded in 2004 by approximately 700 members. It does not have an exclusive focus on women's rights, but has established gender equality as one of its main goals, reflected in its internal rule of at least 50 per cent women in its leadership. Furthermore, it is committed to the independence of Afghanistan from external intervention, the establishment of a democratic government including transitional justice procedures, and secularism. Today SPA has 31,000 members, of which one-third are women. While members include urban intellectuals and wealthy entrepreneurs, the majority come from poor and rural areas.<sup>3</sup>

Besides information from these three organisations, which I collected using participant observation and narrative interviews between 2006 and 2016, I draw on interviews and personal conversations with women's rights activists affiliated with the Afghanistan

Independent Human Rights Commission, Afghan Women's Network (AWN),<sup>4</sup> Afghan Women Education Center, Women and Peace Studies Organisation, Free Women Writers, Afghan Peace Volunteers, Manshur, RAWA, Heinrich Böll Foundation Afghanistan, UN Women Afghanistan, and members of the parliament and of the government of Afghanistan. These were conducted between November 2014 and April 2016.

### **The context: women's rights as a global challenge in a fragile state**

National and international women's movements have been successful in putting issues around women's human rights and violence against women on the international agenda since the 1970s, reflected in a series of international conferences and declarations.<sup>5</sup> On the downside, women's rights, having become a recognised political issue, have been used in many ways: for example, to justify the US 'war on terrorism' in general, and military intervention in Afghanistan specifically (Abu-Lughod 2002, 784). After the victory over the Taliban, the international community established a centralised government in Kabul that, commentators argue, enabled the recreation of patronage networks throughout the country (Barfield 2012). Leaders of the diverse Mujahedin factions who had helped fight the Taliban were brought back to power. Many of those old-turned-new power holders today continue to pursue agendas regarding the rights of women that resemble the ideology of the Taliban. Using the case of Kandahar, research has shown how foreign military intervention and international aid together with the Afghan government have supported and built up patronage systems under the premise of 'security' (Jackson 2015).

In 2010, social justice activists, including Human Rights Watch, highlighted the passing of an amnesty law which protected the perpetrators of war crimes from prosecution.<sup>6</sup> The law was silently accepted by international actors, presumably for the sake of so-called stability, as many of the power holders were responsible for war crimes including sexualised war violence against women, while the United Nations (UN) decided not to publish documentation of those crimes.<sup>7</sup> It seemed to Afghan female and male human rights defenders that the strong support for women's rights which had been voiced by international actors was not being followed through. Regarding the claims of supporting democratisation, state-building, and rule of law, the international community further lost credibility in the eyes of many Afghans by unanimously supporting and accepting a series of increasingly fraudulent elections from 2004 to 2014,<sup>8</sup> which climaxed in brokering the current National Unity Government,<sup>9</sup> and which strongly contributed to the power struggles the article will look into further below.

Given this political framework, it might not be surprising that Afghanistan is still ranked at 152 out of 155 on the UN's Gender Inequality Index (UNDP 2014). The Afghan First Lady, Rula Ghani, has recently criticised many of the projects for women funded by the international community over the past decade and a half as 'symbolic', and not able to catalyse real change (Tolo News 2016).

To understand better perspectives of women outside the capital, AWN recently consulted 200 women leaders throughout the country to collect their views on the question of women's progress (AWN 2016). Participants focused on three areas of progress

which they considered of real value to women: progress that needs to be protected and built on. The first area of progress they identified was that the Afghan government has developed a legal framework that demands and promotes a gender-equal society. A second area of progress noted was a physical presence of women as decision-makers and role models in government, parliament, judiciary, education, and civil society positions has been established. A third and final area of progress was access to education and work outside the home, which has been increased to a certain extent (*ibid.*).

### State regulations as a framework for change

My own research revealed strong support among internationally funded women's rights organisations for the current legal framework that demands and promotes a gender-equal society. Although the legal framework, developed by the Afghan government together with international actors, is seen as having room for improvement, NGO research participants widely see it as the most striking achievement to date, and are determined to safeguard it. Women's rights groups like AWN, MA, and AWSDC have quite successfully been involved in the establishment of the legislature that supports gender equality in multiple ways, and have stopped backlashes that aimed to dismantle it. The most prominent example given was the Elimination of Violence Against Women Law (EVAW law), passed as a presidential decree in 2009 and since then repeatedly under attack. The EVAW law has for the first time criminalised rape and other forms of violence against women.<sup>10</sup>

However, the strategy of changing gender norms through laws is certainly an important step, but not sufficient. Historically, Afghanistan has had plural customary, religious and statutory legal systems, and this remains the case. There is a 'sharp state-society divide' (Schetter 2013, 270) that has a long tradition in Afghanistan. Formal laws and policies are still widely questioned, and this is not helped by the reality of widespread corruption and inefficiency in the judiciary system, which means the implementation of state law is extremely limited.

While the NGOs in my research are aware of this problem, an interesting finding is that a very strong conviction exists among them that change has to come from within the system, and that therefore the government and its structures have to be strengthened and supported. In contrast, the SPA has a different attitude to this question: interviewees strongly criticised the current government and its international allies as corrupt and undemocratic, and considered the strengthening of existing structures as useless. Their view was that legal reforms are governmental concessions for women's rights, and lip service only – tools to keep women in check.

To an extent, women activists in civil society have successfully claimed space, enabling them to participate in governmental decisions that affect women's rights. They have established platforms that are regularly being consulted, although they likewise recognise the danger of mere symbolic participation, as has been shown in different incidents.

For example, in 2014 President Ghani agreed to have a women's advisory board consisting of 21 women selected by civil society, the selection procedure being facilitated by AWN. After a very careful, transparent, and time-consuming process of identifying a selection

committee, reviewing the CVs of hundreds of women from all provinces, interviewing and selecting 21 of them, and proposing structures for the advisory board, the President changed his mind about the whole issue, which caused considerable frustration among women involved in the process. Another example was the fact-finding mission on the lynching of Farkhunda, a young woman who was wrongly accused of having burned the Holy Qur'an. She was killed by a mob in the centre of Kabul in March 2015.<sup>11</sup> The fact-finding mission was staffed with highly qualified women and men and brought a broad range of facts to the surface. Many of these facts were not considered in the trial that followed, and the perpetrators either went unpunished or with minor sentences<sup>12</sup>

Women's rights activists highlighted that despite progress on some measures of participation which have allowed women to be involved in decision-making and aspects of public life, profound changes in the lives of most women and in the underlying societal gender norms cannot be seen: by and large, women are seen as secondary to men, and any decision concerning their lives is taken by their fathers, brothers, or sons. For those living in urban spaces and lucky to have liberal families, opportunities for education, work, and political participation have opened up. But for the vast majority of Afghan women, access to education and work – and to health care, justice, and education, and a life free of violence – continues to be extremely limited.

### **Women's rights work in Afghanistan: mapping power and politics**

Unequal gender relations have a long tradition in Afghan communities, and today are well guarded by an interwoven network of community elders, religious leaders, government representatives, and other power holders. In contrast to the 'popular perception of instability and disorder', structures of power can be quite consistent and strong in Afghanistan (Mielke and Wilde 2013, 353). However, in the course of the wars and after the fall of the Taliban regime, power holders have changed in many locations, from a system of local elites that mostly encompassed traditional elders and religious leaders inclined to serve their constituencies, to power holders who rely on money and weapons and are less interested in people's needs, and this process has been supported consciously and unconsciously by some of the international military, political, and development strategies.

The female director of a women's rights NGO gave a power analysis of the current situation as follows:

The changes happen at the local level. That's where the power lies. And they are very smart to have kept their power on the villages, on the communities ... The grip that they have on communities is through religion. They also have at the same time guns in their service, they have gunmen ... , and they buy people literally ... Because they are so powerful they would ensure that the governor is actually from them. Chief of police is from them, so it's their son, or their uncle, it's a very much netted structure. (Interview, Kabul, 24 March 2016)

### **Political power holders**

Many of today's power holders are connected to former Mujahidin commanders or, depending on the geographic location and since the return of the Taliban in many



provinces, to Taliban leaders. Often they have not only committed atrocities during the Civil War, but are also well-known today in their communities for committing sexualised and other forms of violence against women and girls or for protecting perpetrators of such crimes. Human Rights Watch (2013) has documented examples that involve sexualised and other forms of violence against women, and anecdotal evidence was offered to the author from numerous sources during my research. In order to trespass across boundaries guarded by these networks, individuals and groups have to be very courageous and determined, as this can be extremely dangerous: not only socially but also physically.

One research participant, a male women's rights activist, concludes:

In a country like Afghanistan, that the government is so corrupt, as like there is no government, these criminals can buy everybody. They can commit anything that they want. If you are not connected well with the social power, you will be alone. Nobody will support you and you will be very fragile. Anybody who wants to trigger some kind of attacks or anything, it's very easy. And as I told you, when we are working as a women's rights activist, we have been labelled. (Interview, Kabul, 24 November 2014)

Secular and religious power structures are often interconnected on the local level. In an interview in Kabul with a women's rights activist, I was told:

A warlord in a community, for example – he has so many gunmen, he has so much money that he has taken from other people, and ... to keep people under his control, he needs some religious supporters. So what he does, he goes and pays for the mullah to be on his side. Or continues building mosques or buying Qurans ... So they are part of the same team, and many times they are the same people as well. So one of them is needed for the other to survive. (Interview, Kabul, 24 March 2016)

### **Religious leaders**

Religious leaders are, therefore, another key group of power holders. Especially for less-educated Afghans in rural areas, mullahs<sup>13</sup> and other religious leaders are the most important authority to refer to. Mullahs are considered to be healers, judges, and teachers. Some have inherited their position, and are neither educated in Islamic studies, nor in other areas, but others are highly educated scholars. In any case, they are generally considered an important institution for safeguarding traditional norms and values, which are often framed as Islamic law (Borchgrevink 2007). However, this picture needs nuancing: community elders can be more powerful than mullahs, if mullahs fail to preach what the elders perceive as the correct interpretation of religion and tradition (personal conversation, Kabul, August 2016).

Religious leaders have a crucial role in weddings, a key women's rights issue since child marriage is still rampant in the country. A 2010 mortality survey by the Ministry of Public Health found that 53 per cent of women in the 25–49 age group were married by the age of 18, and 12 per cent of girls aged 15–19 became pregnant or gave birth (Human Rights Watch 2013, 5). UNICEF (2016) statistics indicate that among today's 20–24-year-old women, 33 per cent had married under the legal age of 18 – compared to the Ministry of Public Health figures this indicates a decrease in child brides. But the role of religious



leaders regarding women's rights often is even more personal: time and again cases of rape and sexual harassment by mullahs themselves come to the fore, as well as news about mullahs taking young girls as their second or third wives.<sup>14</sup>

In recent years, the position of religious leaders has become contested: urban and educated young people striving for a modernised Afghanistan are starting to turn away, viewing mullahs as representatives of backwardness, and overcome tradition. Education in Afghanistan is divided between a secular system with primary and secondary schools and universities, and a religious system consisting of madrasas (private or government-run schools for religious education) and the Sharia faculty at Kabul University. There is no overview on number and curricula of madrasas (Wardak *et al.* 2007). An unknown but apparently growing number of them are influenced by Salafism and Wahabism, often funded by Saudi Arabia and used to radicalise students (Osman 2015).

In some communities the number of children being sent to madrasas for religious education has effectively decreased, as trust in mullahs is shrinking. Religious leaders, afraid of losing power and influence over people, try to prevent change from seeping into their communities. One female NGO staff member who has conducted several trainings for mullahs on gender-based violence told me: 'Everyone should depend on them, they want to be owner of their communities' (interview, 18 April 2016). She added that recently, one of the most featured topics during Friday prayers has been how women's rights are against Islam, and that women should not work outside the house, especially not in NGOs. Another trainer told me: 'They only use verses for the benefit of men, they are hiding verses that are for the benefit of women' (interview, 18 April 2016). Women activists from Mazar-e Sharif told me that they once even went and complained to the Department of Hajj and Religious Affairs, asking whether mullahs did not have any other topics to preach about (interview, 18 April 2016).

### **Mobilising structures: what activities are able to effect real change?**

Here, I focus on a range of strategies for effecting change on women's rights issues, in Afghanistan's current fragile context.

Thinking about forms of mobilisation in such a diverse and volatile context, Afghan women's rights activists mostly struggle with *legitimacy* (will this have the moral and ideational authority to be persuasive or even binding?) (Williams 2004, 102). In the case of Afghanistan, women's rights are widely seen as illegitimate as they are equated with 'un-Islamic' values, and then likely to be responded to with violence, even deadly violence.

It is therefore not surprising that rather conservative forms of mobilisation are mostly used by women activists: advocacy meetings, awareness-raising sessions, round table discussions, and, to a certain extent, media speeches and street protests. Several of my interview partners strongly rejected forms of protest that crossed certain culturally accepted boundaries, like the 'lady dressed in steel',<sup>15</sup> perceiving them as damaging the struggle for women's rights and making their work even more difficult (interview, Kabul, 10 March 2016).

### *Working to influence power holders on women's rights*

Women's rights organisations use different strategies to cope with this scenario of high risk and powerful networks of conservative forces, including political and religious leaders. While MA pursues a strategy of staying away from the 'strongmen' as much as possible, AWSDC co-operates with them, using relationships with them as a way to reach out to people, especially in the provinces, and to be protected. Through them, AWSDC reaches out to many other religious and community leaders and uses their influence to promote women's rights. According to AWSDC, many of their awareness-raising projects on women rights and on the inclusion of women in local peace-building initiatives would not have been possible without these relations, especially outside Kabul.

One member of the senior management told me:

In Kabul there are maybe 2,000 NGOs like us. But AWSDC is one of them who is known by the strong people like Abdullah Abdullah, like Dostum, president Ashraf Ghani, even Ustad Sayyaf. So all of them now know AWSDC. (Interview, Kabul, 14 March 2016)

In particular, working with and through religious leaders is a strategy that several NGOs are experimenting with. Recognising the important role of mullahs in Afghan society, some women's rights NGOs have identified them as a key group to influence, hoping for a greater impact on lived gender norms and practices than through governmental laws and policies.

### *Engaging with religious leaders on women's rights*

MA has carefully developed concepts to conduct workshops for mullahs on topics like EVAW law, child marriage, and gender, but staff described these trainings as a very tough job: insults such as 'women are low in capacity, and do not deserve to train men', and 'looking at you [women] training us here, is equal to inviting us for making sex' are frequent (email conversation, 2 February 2016).

Many mullahs do not accept women teaching them something related to Islam, and in particular NGO women, who are often younger in age. During training sessions, MA staff had found it is not possible to mention 'women's rights' or address only women's issues. However, strategies needed to be found, and were developed. An example was framing the topic of 'child marriage' as 'age of marriage in the light of Islam', with trainers framing the messages they wished to convey to religious leaders by using verses of the Quran, and carefully avoiding any accidental use of English words which cause leaders to accuse them of importing foreign ideas.

According to MA's experience, mullahs are theoretically aware about rights which women are granted in Islam, but not about the practical implications of issues such as child marriage on these rights. This offers a way of engaging them. In workshops on child marriage, MA trainers have pointed out how child marriage is against the right to health that Islam grants to women. In the Qur'an, the age of marriage is connected to the maturity of the girl, and a popular interpretation is that girls are ready for marriage

once they had their first period. In detailed work, the MA training team (consisting of a medical doctor, a psychologist, and a lawyer who has studied at the Sharia faculty), illustrate the different health, psychological, and legal consequences of early marriage and its devastating effects on women, their children, and the whole family. In the end, most of the mullahs who have participated in such sessions have accepted the explanations and points made. However, MA staff pointed out that it remains unclear to what extent they change their messages once they are back in their communities.

In turn, AWSDC planned for a three-day conference, titled 'Evaluating Harms of Sexual Violence from Islamic & Legal Perspectives', which the organisation held in March 2016 in one of the few luxurious hotels in Kabul. It hosted more than 350 participants, including civil society, government officials, and 200 religious leaders from different parts of the country. Afghanistan's CEO spoke at the conference, together with the Minister of Hajj and Religious Affairs, and the Minister of Women's Affairs. The high-level focus continued with a delegation of mullahs being brought to the Presidential Palace where President Ghani offered them a speech about the compatibility of women's human rights with Islamic law, followed by a dinner.

At the conference, I interviewed participants for their views about holding such events. Some conference participants were convinced that the mullahs just came to enjoy good food and a trip to the capital, along with money for their expenses. Others thought that the conference topics would be seen by the religious leaders as relevant, and would have an impact, at least in the long run (personal conversations, Kabul, 7 March 2016).

### *Challenges and dilemmas about work with religious leaders*

Some critics feel working with religious leaders is a strategy that should not be over-used. SPA, which strongly believes in secularism, is strictly against the strategy of working with those it sees as 'commercial mullahs' (email conversation, 7 June 2016), who it sees as being more interested in money than in religion. The rationale for choosing not to engage with religious leaders, and particularly not holding high-level events like the one described, is that this will contribute to their increased power and status, while it will not change their attitude. The argument is that they might even use the opportunity to spread their misogynist interpretation of Islam (interview, Kabul, 21 March 2016).

To sum up, there has not been enough research on the strategy of influencing mullahs, but indications are that short-term approaches, including holding one-off events and training sessions, are likely to be in vain, and possibly even counterproductive. More in-depth strategies that some of my interview partners thought might be fruitful have not yet been trialled. These include engaging intensely with a small group of open-minded mullahs who could be turned into allies, and training a group of women to become highly knowledgeable in a liberal, women-friendly Islam or maybe even to become mullahs themselves, who could then discuss the role of women in Islam with religious leaders in their own language (interview with an activist, Kabul, 16 March 2016).

## The meaning of security for women's rights activists

Security is one of the main challenges for all working on women's rights in Afghanistan, and for activists it plays out on different levels that are not always obvious. The overall security situation in the country has been continuously deteriorating since 2005 when Taliban started to reassemble and gain ground again.<sup>16</sup> Women and girls have been increasingly restricted in their movements, and security precautions are sometimes used as justifications to keep them under control. One activist told me: 'Security has become a good reason for them to stop you from everything' (interview, Kabul, 21 March 2016). Likewise, demonstrations are often restricted because of security concerns, and possible protection and persecution mechanisms are not being followed through:

The problem in Afghanistan is, there is no consequences if something does happen to us. And we have seen time and time again that women have been killed, and nobody has done anything about it. No one has been arrested, not one person. (Skype interview, 18 April 2016)

There are threats by Taliban and other armed opposition groups against women's rights activists, which was once again demonstrated during and after the Taliban attack on Kunduz in September 2015. Women's initiatives like a women's radio station and a shelter for women were raided by the attackers. Tolo TV, a progressive television station, discovered and publicised the fact that Taliban soldiers had raped women during these raids, a very courageous move which resulted in a deadly attack in which seven journalists were killed.<sup>17</sup> According to rumours, government soldiers also raped women while recapturing Kunduz, but no one dared to comment on this publicly (personal conversation with an UN Women official, Kabul, 16 March 2016).

Added to these risks of working to promote women's rights is the fear of domestic violence, which is particularly strong for any women who violates gender norms. The majority of women in Afghanistan (unless they are very lucky and have supportive and liberal husbands or fathers) face some form of gender-based violence, in particular domestic violence. What is often forgotten is that many women's rights activists also suffer domestic violence that in many cases intensifies because of their activism (personal conversation with an activist, Kabul, 24 March 2016).

Domestic violence is mostly not recognised by international agencies as a problem linked to women's activism. I once tried to support an activist whose violent husband had threatened to kill her: a threat which was clearly linked to her work. I consulted an official in the German Embassy, who labelled the issue as domestic violence, indicating that as such, there was nothing the Embassy could do. Had the issue been seen as political violence, there would have potentially been grounds for the activist to claim asylum (personal experience, November 2014).

## Responding to the challenges of working within a depoliticised development framework

Several activists I encountered in my research perceived a gap between NGOs and the society, and they linked that gap to the fact that most of women's rights work is project based:

Because ... everything is a project. When they have money and fund, they do their work. But when it's finished, it's finished. They don't have any more commitment for that. So it's very difficult to change the situation of people with NGO work. (Interview with an activist, Kabul, 13 March 2016)

This is one of the reasons why projects and programmes instigated over the past decade have failed to challenge the unequal power relations which shape women's and girls' lives. Another one is the fact that many of the bigger humanitarian and development projects have been strongly promoted and shaped by western actors. This contributes to the general perception that women's rights are a western concept, based on the concept of individualism, and posing a threat to values of honour central to most parts of Afghan society. What seems to be missing is a broader women's movement, rooted in the society and enabling women to advocate jointly for change on local levels.

Being organised as an NGO has positive and negative effects for the aim of enhancing women's rights and changing gender norms in Afghanistan. A considerable amount of money has been made available for projects on this topic, and donors have by and large been generous and open for different kinds of approaches as suggested by organisations, which brought about opportunities like increasing literacy of women, establishing women shelters in several provinces, and many more. On the down-side, negative effects of NGO-isation that have been observed and analysed in other regions of the world (e.g. Alvarez 2009; Islah 2007) can also be found in Afghanistan to a great extent, for example favouritism by donors shown towards larger women's rights organisations, resulting in lack of chances for more grass-roots groups to spread and grow; a focus on short-term projects that are not followed up; and a de-politicisation of women's rights work. It is critical to ensure that all involved in women's rights work understand it is a political<sup>18</sup> enterprise.

### Mobilisation as a political approach

Raising women's awareness of the roots of gender inequality and the denial of women's rights is a fundamental feminist<sup>19</sup> strategy. According to bell hooks :

Feminists are made, not born ... Like all political positions one becomes a believer in feminist politics through choice and action. When women first organised in groups to talk together about the issue of sexism and male domination, they were clear that females were as socialized to believe sexist thinking and values as males, the difference being simply that males benefited from sexism more than females and were as a consequence less likely to want to surrender patriarchal privilege. (hooks 2000, 7)

Few Afghan women rights groups use this line of thought as a basis for their activities, and one of the reasons may be that sitting and talking in groups would perhaps not sound very impressive in a donor proposal. Likewise, donors are not approaching women's rights agendas from the perspective of fundamental feminist movement-building – rather, from the position of a focus on governance and development. But according to one activist, this may be part of what is needed to finally achieve real change:

At least in Afghanistan, if you want to change the situation of women, you need some very very basic and very very revolutionary changes ... If you can only teach a woman, it is not enough. If

you don't change and make a revolution in their mind. Now we have a lot of women who are educated, but still they are misogynist. Still they don't think, believe on their ability. (Interview, Kabul, 13 March 2016)

In the Afghan context, it is a rare opportunity for women to come together outside their families and learn to express themselves. Even the minority of women who attend secondary schools and universities<sup>20</sup> do not usually have opportunities to engage in critical thinking about gender relations. Many activists themselves have not had much opportunity and space to reflect more broadly on the implications of unequal gender norms.

MA has started this work. It has developed their Peer Support Groups because staff perceived a great demand for group work among their clients. Former clients of psychosocial counselling groups who show leadership skills and a wish to work for women's rights are selected to lead groups on their own, with the support of MA staff. I was told that these groups soon turned into being a place for chat but also for sharing among women who had not known each other before. They talk about their daily challenges and build relationships with each other, learning that their problems are not only personal but also political.

Slowly slowly they become like a group of strong women ... They are starting to do advocacy against some of the wrong practices of the culture. (Interview with a management team member of MA, Cologne, 18 April 2016)

SPA also works on raising awareness among women and men on gender relations. Its main activity is to go to the communities and talk to people on social injustices while showing them possibilities of change in their own realms, expecting both women and men to push existing boundaries. SPA's approach is to encourage people to start with small or bigger transformations in their daily lives, thus triggering change in their communities: 'If you start, another will also start' (interview, Kabul, 21 March 2016).

### Overcoming a perceived lack of solidarity and unity

Another issue which came up in the research was a perceived lack of trust and unity among women's rights activists. This was often mentioned: while joint advocacy strategies exist and work effectively, nearly all of my interview partners mentioned that they sense a lack of solidarity, trust, and unity among women activists.

There are several factors that can contribute to an explanation of this. Two of them have already been mentioned: first, the internalised gender norms of women being worthless, making it difficult to value solidarity among women; and second, an 'NGO-game' (interview with an activist, Kabul, 11 November 2014), that started quite suddenly and on a rather big scale, bringing competition to women's groups that never had the chance to build a 'politicized sisterhood' (hooks 2000, 11).

A third perspective on the lack of solidarity and sisterhood perceived by participants in my research can be drawn from research on trauma and fear: as described earlier, Afghan women activists live in a constant state of insecurity. A mind in a state of threat turns its focus on itself and into survival mode: the wider view narrows down, a focus on well-

known patterns grows, and the ability to connect with others diminishes. While a link can be assumed between living in a constant state of insecurity and a low ability to build solidarity and trust, further research is needed on how this plays out in the case of women's activism in Afghanistan.

### *The seduction of wealth, power, and fame*

A factor relevant for dynamics within and between women's rights NGOs is what is widely called corruption and nepotism. Afghan leaders tend to use socially well-established 'techniques of rule' (Schetter 2013, 270), whether they are government officials, religious leaders, military commanders, NGO managers, or village elders:

Reciprocal relationships, which are defining social interactions across Afghanistan, determine practices outside as well as inside the government apparatus.

These cultural practices of establishing relationships in connection with a factual absence of statutory governing structures can be assumed as one of the reasons why corruption and nepotism have taken on vast dimensions in recent years: Afghanistan ranks among the three last positions on the corruption index of Transparency International (2015), and relations as well as money determine whether people find a job or gain access to justice. According to several conversations I had in the course of my research and time working in Afghanistan, corruption and nepotism are also present in donor agencies: grants are frequently given to NGOs against bribes, with international and national staff involved in the practice.

Women are not immune to the seduction of gain offered through these means: many NGO leaders put donor money in their own pocket and employ relatives to cover up the fraud. Power and wealth is also attractive to women, and some of them choose to work for their own benefit, while continuing to implement projects for disadvantaged women (personal conversation, Kabul, 29 March 2016). On the downside, motivation of staff can be lost to work towards change due to this practice, and quality of project implementation suffers (personal conversation, Kabul, 30 March 2016).

### *Conclusions and recommendations towards the international community*

In my discussion of the views and experience of women's rights activists in Afghanistan, I have tried to carve out several hindering factors they perceive as challenging, as well as strategies they pursue to overcome them. Space and opportunities for women's rights work are extremely restricted. While approaches to change gender norms at the state level have been successful, resulting in a comparatively women-friendly legal framework in state law, the implementation of this law is very limited. Strategies to work with power holders and religious leaders require collaboration with men who have committed or account for human rights violations and who are not concerned with changing gender norms. Security challenges for women rights activists are enormous, and range from violence within their families to potential repercussions by fundamentalists afraid of losing power.



The focus on state capacity to guarantee services equally to citizens in fragile contexts means that it is critical to adopt a gender perspective, since gender inequality and gender-based violence mean women are unable to access these services. However, the technical focus on services, and even the focus on governance and security, means fundamental aspects of feminist practice are left out of the picture. Social norms on gender roles and relations need challenging at all levels of society. Development projects targeting disadvantaged women to ensure they have access to resources and services are much needed in Afghanistan, but they will not change fundamental power relations that are, on the one hand, strongly rooted in men's and women's minds and, on the other hand, protected by a network of powerful leaders. A strategic and in-depth approach to awareness raising on gender norms and injustices at community levels might be a very slow process, but could eventually contribute to sustainable change.

### *Acknowledgement of Afghan women's agency, expertise and experience*

In conclusion: women's rights are *political*. It may seem strange even to feel the need to state this, but it must be reiterated. If fragile states are to become sustainable states, where both women and men can live with dignity and freedom, donors need to focus on supporting the political and social rights of women and girls. They should do this by connecting with women's movements, consulting them and learning from them, and could support their movement-building. As noted at the start of the article, women's activism has a past in Afghanistan which long predates 9/11. Most donors and development professionals have by now given up on a 'saving Afghan women' attitude (Abu-Lughod 2002, 783), but representation in their home countries still does not produce a perspective of Afghan women activists as strong and independent actors, who have actually initiated women's rights work in their own country. The international community should also be careful to ensure interaction with the diverse field of smaller and larger women's groups working for change instead of focusing on a few well-known ones.

Communication and consultation with activists on an equal level is essential. There still is a communication gap between donors and NGO staff in terms of expectations, language, and way of thinking and speaking. In most cases, Afghans are expected to adapt their communication and procedures to a western style of thinking<sup>21</sup> which is one reason for an increasing number of men working in women rights NGOs: on average they are better qualified for many jobs and much more flexible when it comes to working on weekends, or attending meetings after office hours in embassies or similar high-security compounds.

While demanding human and women's rights, the international community should be aware that it has contributed to strengthening patronage networks based on money and weapons, with power holders who have committed human and women's rights atrocities. It should evaluate its role with regard to its military-centred approach, a preference for short-term stability instead of longer-term justice, and flaws in democratisation and state-building efforts in fragile contexts. The attitude of some western actors, implying that Afghans are neither capable nor interested in democratic and human rights standards,

would be difficult to sustain. Without an honest review and acknowledgement of mistakes, double standards are applied, and Afghans are well aware of that.

## Notes

1. For more information on MA, see [www.medicafghanistan.org/View.aspx?PageAlias=home](http://www.medicafghanistan.org/View.aspx?PageAlias=home) (last checked by the author 21 August 2016).
2. For more information on AWSDC, see [www.awsdc.org.af/](http://www.awsdc.org.af/) (last checked by the author 21 August 2016).
3. For more information on SPA, see [www.hambastagi.org/new/english-section/](http://www.hambastagi.org/new/english-section/) (last checked by the author 21 August 2016).
4. AWN was founded in 1995 following the Fourth UN World Conference on Women, held in Beijing. Today, it represents 125 organisations and 3,500 individual members all over the country. AWN considers itself the largest women's rights advocacy organisation in Afghanistan and the cornerstone of Afghanistan's growing women's movement (AWN Strategic Plan 2015–2017 (p. 5), <http://awn-af.net/index.php/cms/content/499>, last checked by the author 18 August 2016). It recently explored the priorities and views of 200 women's leaders throughout the country (AWN 2016).
5. Some of the most important milestones were the UN Decade for Women 1975–1985, the four Global Women's Conferences 1975–1995, the adoption of CEDAW in 1979, the 1993 Vienna Declaration that recognised violence against women as human rights violation, and the UN Security Council Resolutions 1325 on women, peace and security (2000) and 1820 (2008)/1888 (2009) on sexualised war violence.
6. See [www.hrw.org/news/2010/03/10/afghanistan-repeal-amnesty-law](http://www.hrw.org/news/2010/03/10/afghanistan-repeal-amnesty-law) (last checked by the author 21 August 2016).
7. See [www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2012/09/6\\_Kouvo\\_A\\_Plan\\_without\\_Action.pdf](http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2012/09/6_Kouvo_A_Plan_without_Action.pdf) (last checked by the author 21 August 2016).
8. See, for example, [www.theguardian.com/world/2009/oct/04/afghanistan-elections-peter-galbraith-un](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/oct/04/afghanistan-elections-peter-galbraith-un) and [www.nytimes.com/2014/12/17/world/asia/afghan-voting-fraud-detailed-in-new-report.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/12/17/world/asia/afghan-voting-fraud-detailed-in-new-report.html) (both last checked by the author 21 August 2016).
9. See [www.afghanistan-analysts.org/elections-2014-51-finally-a-deal-but-not-yet-democracy/](http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/elections-2014-51-finally-a-deal-but-not-yet-democracy/) (last checked by the author 21 August 2016).
10. Information on the making of the EAW law can be found in Wimpelmann (2015).
11. A comprehensive account and analysis can be read at [www.huffingtonpost.com/ann-jones/farkhunda-is-our-sister\\_b\\_7266560.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/ann-jones/farkhunda-is-our-sister_b_7266560.html) (last checked by the author 18 August 2016).
12. See [www.afghanistan-analysts.org/police-treated-with-kid-gloves-the-flaws-of-the-farkhunda-trial/](http://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/police-treated-with-kid-gloves-the-flaws-of-the-farkhunda-trial/) and [www.hrw.org/news/2016/03/09/dispatches-afghanistans-legal-system-fails-farkhunda-again](http://www.hrw.org/news/2016/03/09/dispatches-afghanistans-legal-system-fails-farkhunda-again) (both last checked by the author 17 August 2016).
13. The terms *religious leaders* and *mullahs* are often used interchangeably, with mullahs referring more narrowly to preachers in mosques. Regarding the number of mullahs, Antonio Giustozzi estimates: 'with five to fifteen mosques in each village, the mullahs, who account for ... at least 10 per cent of the adult male population, are a social group with ramifications everywhere' (Giustozzi 2013, 78).
14. Examples of media accounts are at [www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/24748-girl-seeks-divorce-after-being-married-at-12-to-60-year-old](http://www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/24748-girl-seeks-divorce-after-being-married-at-12-to-60-year-old), [www.khaama.com/mullah-imam-arrested-for-raping-10-year-old-girl-in-kunduz-6058](http://www.khaama.com/mullah-imam-arrested-for-raping-10-year-old-girl-in-kunduz-6058) and [www.khaama.com/alleged-child-rapist-gets-his-ears-and-nose-cut-off-in-baghlani-6043](http://www.khaama.com/alleged-child-rapist-gets-his-ears-and-nose-cut-off-in-baghlani-6043) (all last checked by the author 18 August 2016).
15. A young woman dressed in metal underwear to protest against sexual harassment in March 2015, see media coverage at [www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-31851830](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-31851830) (last checked by the author 18 August 2016).

16. See, for example, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan 2008 annual and 2016 mid-year reports on the protection of civilians in armed conflict: [https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama\\_09february-annual20report\\_poc202008\\_final\\_11feb09.pdf](https://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/unama_09february-annual20report_poc202008_final_11feb09.pdf) (p. 1) and [http://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/protection\\_of\\_civilians\\_in\\_armed\\_conflict\\_midyear\\_report\\_2016\\_final\\_english\\_31\\_july\\_2016.pdf](http://unama.unmissions.org/sites/default/files/protection_of_civilians_in_armed_conflict_midyear_report_2016_final_english_31_july_2016.pdf) (both last checked by the author 21 August 2016).
17. See [www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/taliban-attack-on-afghan-tv-employees-widely-condemned\\_us\\_56a0e0f4e4b0404eb8f05668](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/taliban-attack-on-afghan-tv-employees-widely-condemned_us_56a0e0f4e4b0404eb8f05668) (last checked by the author 18 August 2016).
18. According to my observation, the notion of 'political' is used in various ways in Afghanistan: (1) in the narrow sense of referring to governmental activities and (2) describing the power struggles and games that are omnipresent in government and society. In this sense, women's rights are already very political in Afghanistan, as they are being misused for many different purposes. The article uses the term 'political' in a third way, describing how discrimination and violence against women is not only personal, but interconnected with societal norms and structures.
19. According to my observation, the term 'feminism' has a negative connotation in large parts of Afghan society, equivalent to the concept of western(ised), independent, men-hating, family-destroying, and immoral women set out to destroy Afghan cultural and religious values. In this article, the notion 'feminism' is used in its original meaning as re-defined by bell hooks: 'Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression' (hooks 2000, viii).
20. In 2008, 12 per cent of women were considered literate (CEDAW 2011). UNICEF 2008–12 statistics show female school attendance ratio at 46.4 per cent in primary and 21.1 per cent in secondary education ([www.unicef.org/infobycountry/afghanistan\\_statistics.html#117](http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/afghanistan_statistics.html#117), last checked by the author 18 August 2016). No figures for tertiary education rates are available, but the ratio of female versus male university students was 24.8 per cent in 2009 (CEDAW 2011).
21. As one example, a women rights NGO was asked to implement workshops in several provinces. They agreed to do it, but wanted their female trainers to travel there with their husbands or other male family members for protection (*mahram*). The donor declined, indicating that travelling with *mahram* is not stipulated by Afghan law (personal conversation, March 2016).

## Notes on contributor

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