



BAAG BRIEFING NOTE: UNDERSTANDING GENDER ISSUES AND PROGRAMMING IN AFGHANISTAN

The situation of Afghan women holds great symbolic significance for the international intervention in Afghanistan. And yet, while this intervention has achieved some gender-related gains, overall results are viewed as disappointing. To better understand the nature of gender issues and related programming in Afghanistan a series of discussions were held with Afghan and non-Afghan actors. In 2013 BAAG undertook in-depth consultations with four prominent international gender experts on Afghanistan¹ and five leading Afghan women's rights activists². This briefing note summarises the key themes and recommendations emerging from these consultations.

1. Misconceptions: The Situation of Women and Gender in Afghanistan

Our consultations indicate there are many misconceptions about the situation of women in Afghanistan. Most notable was the expectation that simply overthrowing the Taliban would deliver changes in gender relations. This, in turn, led to short-term 'quick fix' projects to secure the advancement of women. These are often not well thought out and fail to take into account the sensitivities of Afghan society. Moreover, gender projects are often conceived as isolated projects. Whereas, in reality, they are politically linked to the broader issues of basic freedoms, pluralist politics, development and tolerance in Afghanistan. Education of girls and boys and civic education in gender issues should play a part in this. How Afghan women fare in the years to come will largely depend on the approach of future governments and what happens more broadly in Afghan society.

Another misconception is that, while women only need to be made aware of their rights it is men's attitudes to gender issues that need to be changed. Yet, in reality Afghan women are sometimes complicit in perpetuating a cycle of behaviour, which further entrenches gendered norms. Empowering Afghan women through education and employment would therefore be more effective in the long run than awareness raising alone.

In addition, gender programmes in Afghanistan are often launched without taking into account that the local staff involved in such projects have been traumatised by decades of war. Often these staff members are working in a demanding role, in a stressful environment, and are struggling with their own and others' trauma. More attention should be given to identifying and providing personal support to such individuals.

Recommendations

1. Adopt a long-term approach to transforming gender relations, which provides civic education and promotes education and employment for women and girls;
2. Address the role of women in furthering gender inequalities in future programming; and
3. Provide therapeutic support and guidance to traumatised human rights defenders.

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² Mary Akrami, Arezo Qanih, Nadia Hanifi, Hussain Hasrat, and Samira Hamidi.

2. Violence Against Women and Girls

While many women and girls in Afghanistan experience physical, sexual, economic or psychological violence³, accurately assessing the extent of violence is very challenging. This is the result of the absence of baseline data, the lack of an agreed definition of violence against women and girls (VAWG), and traditional sensitivities in discussing such incidents.

The Law on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) was ratified by Legislative Decree in 2009. It is one of the key legal mechanisms protecting women from violence in Afghanistan. It does this by criminalising several differing types of violence against women, by ensuring compensation to victims of violence, and by providing for a faster response to crimes of this type. However, the implementation of the EVAW Law is limited at best. The weak rule of law, the minimal awareness of the judiciary and the Afghan public regarding EVAW, and a general lack of political will are considered to be the main contributing factors.

Protection of female victims of violence through the provision of shelters has been an effective mechanism in Afghanistan. However, shelter services (education, skills development and legal aid) and their reach are often insufficient. Shelters face a variety of societal, funding, and capacity constraints. Firstly, shelters face much unjustified criticism from conservative elements in Afghanistan for harbouring ‘shamed women’ and ‘prostitutes’. Yet, media and rights groups have, with some success, raised awareness regarding the need for and value of shelters. Many creative TV and radio programmes regarding domestic violence and traditional harmful practices have been aired. Secondly, shelters have been affected by international aid cuts. Many shelters have been forced to stop support to current and new residents as they face discontinuation of funds beyond 2014. Moreover, international donors mostly provide short-term project grants, leaving shelters without long-term core funds. Thirdly, due to increasingly high numbers of violence victims, their unique cases and inconsistencies in legal procedures, shelter managers are primarily engaged in immediate support activities. These cases often result in prolonged litigations. Thus, the rate of residents leaving shelters remains low. A further contributing factor is the stigmatisation they face in mainstream society.

The appropriate location of shelters is another disputed issue. Donors establish/support shelters based on the number of female victims in a given province. Yet, the usefulness of a shelter often also depends on the attitude of female victims regarding the shelter. While there is an important need for donors to fund shelters based upon demand, there is an associated requirement to extend sensitisation activities in shelter projects.

The Afghan and international media have been influential actors in countering violence against women in Afghanistan. On one hand, they have raised Afghan women’s concerns at national and global levels, and on the other, they have raised the legal awareness of the Afghan public. Nonetheless, there is room for major improvements, as media coverage of women issues has at times been counter-productive. On occasion, there is a tendency to exaggerate the plight and/or achievements of Afghan women. Our consultations imply a more realistic and accurate view of Afghan women need be communicated. While it is recognised some reporters may be compelled to emphasise certain aspects of women’s issues, many do not triangulate their findings thus potentially delivering partial or inaccurate stories. Moreover, the various Afghan media outlets have inconsistent women’s rights approaches. While dedicated women rights programmes strive to cautiously approach the various issues women face, certain comedy shows—often on the same channel—demean women and belittle their rights. Comedy is a great tool for changing societal attitudes however.

³ AIHRC (2013). *Violence Against Women in Afghanistan: Root Causes and Situation*.

Our consultations indicate women's rights activists are at great risk in Afghanistan, with anecdotal evidence suggesting that all have experienced intimidation or violence. Those who operate women's shelters are especially at risk. This issue is compounded by women's rights organisations being unable to suitably protect their at-risk staff; activists being unable to obtain international visas should they need to escape violence; the failure of the international community to provide mechanisms to support activists experiencing severe threats or violence; and the fact that perpetrators of crimes against activists are rarely brought to justice by the Afghan security services. Shelter organisations have established a national network which will give them a more powerful voice, but secure funding would allow staff to spend more time on documenting their experience to add weight to their policy recommendations and the further development of their services.

Recommendations

1. Adequately resource the EAW Law High Commission (in Kabul) and Provincial Commissions. The responsibilities of various constituent members of Provincial Commissions should also be codified;
2. International donors should continue to urge the Afghan Government and Parliamentarians to support the implementation of the EAW Law, by reminding the Afghan Government of its Constitutional commitments and international obligations including adherence to the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework, and consider conditionality to reinforce this;
3. Educate judges, judicial staff and the general population about the EAW Law;
4. INGOs should more proactively support the implementation of the EAW Law, given their relative insulation from the pressures of conservative elements in Afghanistan;
5. Afghan civil society should limit critiques of the EAW Law by conducting comparative studies of similar laws in other Islamic countries and disseminating findings;
6. Review all major Afghan laws from a gender perspective and enact necessary amendments;
7. The Afghan Government should support shelters financially and ensure that relevant ministries have consistent programmes and public statements regarding shelters;
8. International donors should provide long-term core support to shelters to improve their services and capacity to manage and document cases. They should also facilitate cooperation between shelters in Afghanistan and other countries to allow for mutual learning;
9. Shelters should continue to raise awareness of their role and services through the national network and to build trust with local communities;
10. International and Afghan media should adopt more robust information sourcing mechanisms. They should cross-check their information with women groups;
11. International donors to the Afghan media should urge the adoption of a gender policy that is balanced and consistent across all their programming;
12. Integrate a protection component into human rights programmes, whilst also establishing emergency mechanisms to support activists experiencing severe threats or violence; and
13. Ensure perpetrators of crimes against women's rights activists and other high profile female figures are brought to justice. Special attention should be paid to crimes committed by members of the security forces or government officials.

3. Gender, Men and Boys

It is often assumed that gender work only relates to improving the situation of women. Our consultations suggested that greater attention is required to integrate men and boys into gender programming. This is not to suggest that women's focussed programming should be compromised, but that a more balanced approach should be adopted. Unbalanced programming can lead to men dismissing gender as irrelevant, which creates further obstacles and hostility.

There have been successful examples of involving men and boys in gender programmes, but these have been limited in number. Our consultations suggest that in Afghan society obtaining the support of male members of the family, male community leaders and male politicians is

necessary to create sustainable women's rights programmes. It is essential that a long-term approach be taken—working with men—to ease women into their new roles.

It is also important to understand notions of masculinity in Afghanistan. Men are expected to provide for their families and can feel disempowered if they fail to do so. Gender work that discusses the responsibilities placed on both men to provide for their families and women to sustain them are more successful at transforming gender relations. This crucially entails recognising the discrimination, violence and gendered norms experienced by men and boys, including: pressures to join security forces to fight for family honour; sexual abuse experienced by young men in the security forces; incidents of severe malpractice in state and privately run orphanages; and the solicitation of dancing boys by predatory males. In Afghanistan, as a society that prizes masculinity, this topic must be broached publically and interventions targeting Afghan men are required to help unpack such expectations and experiences.

Recommendations

1. Include women and men in gender programming, recognising the role that men have played in both supporting women and perpetuating gender inequalities; and
2. Acknowledge the violence, discrimination and gendered norms experienced by Afghan men and boys, and facilitate opportunities for public discussion and private reflection of such issues.

4. Gender Programmes: Drivers of Success, Areas for Improvement

There has been some good gender and women's programming, but it is a sensitive topic as gender is by nature political. Donors have initiated several major programmes to tackle gender inequalities in Afghanistan. These are of three main types: (i) policy frameworks and processes to counter the marginalisation of women in decision-making; (ii) direct funding of women's NGOs and CSOs engaging with women; and (iii) development projects providing services to women and aiming to reduce gender inequalities. Our consultations indicate that all three types of programme include unnecessarily complex, unresponsive and overly bureaucratic procedures. They are confusing to those implementing them, do not respond quickly to real time issues, and allow little room for negotiation. They will also be unsustainable when funding levels decline.

The approach to gender programming in Afghanistan has also been inconsistent, delivering uneven progress. Gender interventions should focus on all sectors, including health care, education, and livelihoods, for example. Our consultations suggested that providing women access to justice is a key priority.

In part such inconsistent programmes are the result of either a total lack of, or tokenistic, consultations during their design phase. Often these programmes had been designed and agreed in advance (which also leads to the duplication of efforts). Where consultations are held in a large gathering the most powerful, often the most conservative, will speak first and others will then concur with what had been said. Moreover, short-termism (as discussed above) and a corresponding lack of suitable monitoring and evaluation further undermines the quality of gender programming. Too often donors seek only anecdotal evidence of change and only request 'success stories'.

The importance of quality staffing was also a key factor in the success of gender programmes. In the 1990s, young inexperienced Afghan women were employed as Gender Focal Points to 'tick the gender box'. Unsurprisingly these women had neither the knowledge nor the authority to address the required issues. At the same time, female expatriate staff did not necessarily have the contextual knowledge of Afghanistan and were largely appointed to provide a 'female perspective'. Later, donors and INGOs began to recruit elite Afghan women on the basis of their gender, status and English language skills rather than their experience or expertise. These women tended to be young graduates from Kabul, usually without practical work experience,

management capacity or research skills. There are, however, presently many very capable Afghan women and men working on gender issues in Afghanistan.

At the same time gender-related training is of varying quality. If the training agency is too prescriptive creativity is stifled and activists become less resourceful. Yet, where gender training programmes use innovative approaches, perhaps using drama or role-play exercises, they are particularly successful. Moreover, training for women in planning and negotiating with male colleagues and decision-makers often gives them confidence. Training for people who are managing women is also important, especially in how to report on and/or deal with sexual harassment. Education regarding the benefits of the involvement of women and the support of men who can advocate for women's inclusion in processes, particularly those relating to peace, are also highly successful. More generally, gender training can be improved. The most successful having been carried out in mixed male and female groups and by male and female co-trainers, whether Afghan or non-Afghan, with expertise and a long-term commitment to the country.

In addition, our consultations indicated that successful gender programmes often drew on lessons learned thereby avoiding classic gender pitfalls. Yet, the staff of many gender programmes in Afghanistan do not have access to the quality reports and resources that enable learning. 'Experts' rarely research what has occurred before, and where they do they often cannot find the required information. Good research and evaluations do exist but many assessments are not widely distributed and some are not published at all, especially if they recount failures. At the same time, the number of 'lessons learned' workshops has declined and those that do take place generally only discuss success stories. The fact that few documents are published in Dari or Pashto compounds this problem.

While many Afghan women's organisations have successfully enabled change with the support of international donors, certain donor policies have been detrimental to effective gender programming in the country. This includes inconsistent funding policies, with some donors requiring women's organisation with a specialised approach to gender programming and others requiring a more generalist approach. This has constrained institutional development in the sector. Secondly, where evaluations are undertaken, the rigid evaluation mechanisms employed by donors do not take into account either the range of gender issues or the variations in gender inequality found across the differing geographical regions of Afghanistan. Thirdly, donor requirements for high levels of English fluency are detrimental to the survival of genuine 'grass roots' gender organisations. Fourthly, donors promote an overemphasis of the quantity, as opposed to the quality, of women's participation. For example, the numbers of female Members of Parliament is often focussed upon as opposed to how meaningful their participation is.

Consultations show that donors have also courted a specific type of female activist, funding their organizations and their trips to speak at international conferences abroad. These trips, while promoting learning also takes activists away from their organizations regularly and for long periods. In addition, activists are given no time to rest on their foreign tours, landing jetlagged and going immediately into non-stop meetings before flying home again and going straight back to work. Many Afghan activists understandably resent this apparent favouritism and feel that more attention should be given to supporting a wider group of activists. Urban Afghan activists, for example, may not have the best understanding of the situation and needs of rural women.

Finally, INGOs have often done their best to support Afghan civil society by speaking out against the infringement of civil liberties. Yet, most international donors have remained notably quiet at these times, apparently reluctant to criticise the Afghan government publicly. Our consultations suggest that benefits may be witnessed if donors were more willing to publically support human rights programmes by challenging the Afghan government on appropriate occasions.

Recommendations

1. Undertake meaningful consultation processes during the design phases of gender programmes, and train Afghan staff members with the necessary skills to do so;

2. Utilise flexible monitoring and evaluation systems—that are sensitive to gender differences across Afghanistan’s geographical regions—to improve gender programme quality;
3. Recruit expatriate and Afghan gender staff based on their experience and expertise, not as a result of solely their English language skills, gender, or status;
4. Ensure gender training is non-prescriptive, adopts innovative approaches, and is undertaken by male and female co-trainers in mixed-gender sessions;
5. Train female staff members to negotiate with male counterparts whilst also sensitising men to the value and appropriate ways of working with women;
6. Ensure gender programme reports, lessons learned and evaluations, whether positive or negative, are made more widely available; and
7. Collect, translate into Dari and Pashto, and disseminate seminal documents addressing gender in Afghanistan.

Further Reading: Seminal Documents on Gender Issues in Afghanistan

Afghanistan Public Policy Research Organization (2013). *Women in Transition in Afghanistan*.

Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, Sippi (2006). *Women's Groups in Afghan Civil Society: Women and Men Working Towards Equitable Partnership in CSOs*. Counterpart International.

International Crisis Group (2013). *Women and Conflict in Afghanistan*. Asia Report 252.

Winter, Elizabeth (2010). *Civil Society Development in Afghanistan*. London School of Economics.