Women's "Empowerment" in Post Conflict Afghanistan

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This paper focuses on, the intricacies of women's "empowerment" in the public domain as "citizens", in the post-war reconstruction scenario in Afghanistan, exploring the complexities of "power" structure in a traditional society. The paper[1] is build around women's experiences and agency for change, and their perception of the international community as facilitators of the process of the "power" transfer. It is an outcome of a two-month research, through interviewing women, and studying various literatures on Afghan women.

This paper first explores the definitions of "power" and "empowerment" in traditional Afghan society. It then discusses the impact of war and post-war reconstruction, and further, the role of external (international community) and internal actors (women groups) on the process of power "transfer".

Power, Empowerment and Citizenship

After decades of war, among the many challenges of post-war reconstruction in Afghanistan, is women's "empowerment". But what does "Empowerment" mean?

"Empowerment" is a very dynamic and context dependent concept. It can be conceived on different levels and domains, as debated by different development agents and feminists (Afshar, 1998). However, in feminist discourse, "power" is defined in a more relational form. It is not defined in isolation but in consideration of the role and relationship of women with women, men and the wider community. The emphasis is not on the "power over", as observed by Rowland (1998), which is a more traditional interpretation of "empowerment". Rowland reflects on different interpretations of "power", with the most possible different connotations, which change the terms of women's "empowerment" out of its usual interpretation of being threatening to the power of the opposite sex. Some of the other interpretations, instead of "power over", that she uses are: "power with"; "power to"; and "power within". The interpretations in these other cases are in a more generic form, such as, "power with" refers to the collective action of tackling a problem together, "power to" as generative or productive power, which creates new possibilities and actions.

For the sake of this paper, I take Kabeer's (2004) definition of "empowerment", which relates to "human agency" in definition of "goals and the ability of acting upon it". I, then, have tried to link it to Lister's (2003:37) reflection on citizenship, discussing human agency in a political arena.

> Citizenship, as participation, represents an expression of human agency in the political arena. Broadly defined citizenship as rights enables people to act as agents.

Before I go further into women's emancipation and their participation in social and political life of the country as citizens, it is important to look at the power structure in a traditional society. What does women's "empowerment" mean in a country where the question of "women" has been part of clashes between the modernists and the traditionalists, throughout the history?

Considering the complexity of the "power" structure within the Afghan society and women's status within the family, community / tribe and finally the state, this research highlights the fact that women's "empowerment" cannot be discussed in terms of

individuality, but, according to a feminist definition   "in relation to men, women" and the community, not in isolation (Rowland, 1998).

Afghan women are not a homogenous class. There are a number of significant socio-economic factors, which contribute to the diversity of women's emancipation in the Afghan society, such as, age; educational level; and, the urban-rural divide. However, in general, Afghanistan is a traditional society where the notion of power is embedded in the patriarchal nature of the culture: reinforcing male supremacy and control over women to uphold family "honour" with conformity to accepted "behavioural norms", which limits women's life choices (Dupree, 1998).

As in other contexts, women's empowerment in Afghanistan cannot be discussed in a void, but should develop, through an understanding of the complexity of power and control structures in different layers around women.

Family / Community

Women's "empowerment" is inherently seen as threatening by men, with the assumption that there will be some kind of a reversal of power relations, in the society. Usually, in every society, but especially in traditional societies, where men are the dominant and inherent decision-makers in social and domestic life, the fear of losing control is an obstacle to women's "empowerment" (Afshar, 1998).

For Afghan women, at least three layers of these power hierarchies exist, starting from home, community / tribe to state, in which the discourse of individual verses family and tribal identity could be discussed. Women's status in the family and tribe is central to family honour and status. This, not only places her in a special restrictive position at home, but also imposes strict division of labour and mobility restrictions. Such values are reinforced by the institution[2].

Such values are reflected and reinforced by the institution. A further issue is the agency of women in coping with these "power over" structures and negotiating, and in some instances, fighting these hierarchies to forge their way to an independent existence.

Having commented on the subtleties of the status of women within the patriarchal family, there are also instances of power and wielding of "power", in the family and community, by both men and women, especially older women, such as taking part in decision making at home and even at the community / tribe level like "peace brokery" (Barakat & Wardell, 2002). There are different factors which impact women's status in the family and community, such as, age, experiences, giving birth to a male child, that change women's status in the family to more "power" wielding positions. However, in post-war Afghanistan, the impact of migration, awareness raising on women's rights, by various women groups to the communities, search for employment in urban centres by males in the families, and the impact of education on males and females cannot be ignored, in positively impacting women.

The State / Conflict

To understand the concept of women's empowerment in post-war reconstruction in Afghanistan, it is important to analyze the socio-political and historical context of the state and the conflict, which is intertwined with the history of women's emancipation. As we see through the historical account, women's agenda was always associated with other state reforms. This made certain groups of the society lose their power, who in turn exploited people, causing deterioration in the status of women and their "empowerment".

Based on the historical and current conflict mutations, I argue that women's "empowerment" has been politicized by the elite, that have controlled the agenda throughout the Afghan history. Women's emancipation has been lacking a fostering, and a broad popular base and environment. Such a top down process has been counter productive and has had a debilitating affect on women's emancipation in Afghanistan, and has repeatedly been exploited the by protagonists. This situation has been further exacerbated by the external actors, supporting the conflict.

However, for the purpose of this paper, it is important to see the impact of the conflict, on women's position, in the various phases of the current conflict; how the short-term gain of "real politic", played by these players, has further subordinated women's position in the Afghan society.

The Afghan conflict, like other contemporary complex emergencies, has mutated over time. It has devastated the state and the civil society institutions, and has affected all Afghans. But women's experiences of war were particularly worse because of their social positioning and the limiting male dominant tradition.

The sequence of events, and the rise and fall of the Alliance, in the Afghan conflict show that the role of external actors, fighting the Soviet and Kabul regime, has been on supporting more perceived radical Islamist groups, such as, *Hizb Islamic Hikmatyar* and *Jamiat Islami*. The support of such groups has been more on the strategic interests of the external state, such as Pakistan, on the settlement of the disputed issues like Pashtunistan (Tomsen, 2001).

The limited space which women have gradually reached, has been constrained in the contemporary conflict through the traditional backlash, making women's emancipation and empowerment regress to the previous century. This is specially indicated in Moghadam's (1994) account of women's emancipation in Afghan history: the reforms which were foreseen by King Abdul Rahman Khan; Ammanulah Khan on the customary law issues around family code or depicted in the PDPA period in different degrees, almost a century later (1880-1979).

The review of the literature on the historical account of women's emancipation shows, that the politicization of women's empowerment and considering women as a vehicle of change in the Afghan society has been counter productive, regardless of whether it was the state modernization reforms of King Ammanullah Khan in the early 19th century or the Sovietization of the state through social reforms of the communist regime in the 21th century.

The state instability, due to it being a weak state and its dependence on the tribal power structure, has weakened the process of women liberalization, in both the contemporary and old history. In many cases, the state opponent elite have been able to capitalize on the sentiments of the expandable population for gaining political power, using the women's agenda.

What happened in the end was that there were compromises on the position of women's status, as we observed in the Najib government changes of the State Constitution or the Ammanullah regime, cutting back on the wide education programme for women. Both the cases show the weak public base for policy, that is ill-informed, in the social context of the country, which fails women's agenda for progress and inclusion.

The New Era of Post-War Reconstruction and Women's "Empowerment"

Reconstruction in Afghanistan is a new opportunity, in many ways, for women's "empowerment", where the country is in the process of developing new norms, rules and establishing new institutions (Sweetman, 2005). The Bonn Agreement has laid the initial roadmap for women's inclusion in the nation-building agenda. This has been initiated with

the formation of the women's ministry, and women's participation in the country's political institutions, after years of their systematic exclusion from the public arena.

In the post-war era, women's emancipation comes through the top down process. However, one can argue that this period can be distinguished with a more wider public base, and a new conscious raising among women and communities, compared to any other period in the history of women "empowerment" in Afghanistan. Such an argument can be associated to migrations, flourishing of NGOs, emergence of women groups, and finally, the failure of the radical conservative traditionalist groups, such as, that of *Taliban*.

However, these opportunities can be less productive due to several factors: the pace of time-scale of the processes; the fragile peace and growing insecurity; and the practical socio-economic realities. Afghanistan needs more time to take more tangible steps towards real ownership. That is, by giving adequate training, capacity building, with affirmative action towards women's participation at all levels of the reconstruction process, in order to make as steady a headway as possible, towards women's "empowerment" in the future.

Women's rights and status is very much embedded in the country's needs and security, in its broadest sense. However, for women to exercise full participation in the reconstruction and political process, there is a need for more gender sensitive lenses to consider the complexity of issues surrounding women, and the pursuance of women's "empowerment" in the Afghan society.

Afghan women are aware of the slow and steady changes, which should come through addressing the basic needs of the society, through wider education and promotion of skills training. However, what is really needed is a more coordinated effort from the international community, in facilitating and enabling the environment, for development and women's empowerment.

Women and Political Processes

The transition to democracy and state-building in Afghanistan has created an opportunity structure for women, to move their interests onto the political agenda, where previously it was subordinated to national liberation struggle. A number of factors which contribute, besides the change of international politics, even justifying war on Afghanistan as liberating women, include increased consciousness and mobilization among women, at least the urban educated elite. Afghan women have been previously sidelined, either by elite men, controlling the politics of *Jihad*, or their own conscious efforts not to indulge in highly controversial, and, in many cases, impossible issues which stopped their mobility and working outside home, during the years of *Jihad*.

The role of the NGOs, and awareness raising and mobilization by women groups and other civil society organizations cannot be ignored. The efforts of a small number of women in the constitution-making process, where inspite of a high number of men out numbering women, helped secure 25 percent quota seats in the Parliament's lower house for women. This is besides bringing the article of quality of men and women to the Constitution (Afghan Constitution, 2003).

As well, the high number of women registration in the election, comparably in some districts, exceeded the number of men. The JEMB notes that more than 40 percent women were registered for presidential election (JEMB, 2005).

While there are still many issues related to the full participation of women in the political process and their recognition as citizens, there is reason for cautious optimism. For instance, among the total number of women registered, how many, really and consciously, cast their votes.

Women are not immune from the ethnic, linguistic and political divide, which is drawn up by the factional leadership. A number of women, who came to the Constitution Loya *Jirga,* (Grand Constitutional Council) were also backed by the hard-line Islamist leaders For example, lobbying for the Islamic *Hijab*[3], in addition to intimidation of other female members. While there are efforts, on the part of the very young women's movement, to address such divisions collectively, these divides still continue to surface from time to time. When I was talking to women activists and leaders in Kabul, this divide was recognized by them as a salient issue, and as an obstacle to women's collective action.

> We don't have a proper networking system among women to empower all women equally; we have ethnic, linguistic and political interests which have closed the door to impartial women.
>
> *Women's rights activist, Kabul*

This has, consequently, decreased the internal trust and support among women, who are as fragmented as the entire Afghan society at large. There are two points which I believe effect such fragmentation among women: collective identity and life style. While women are part of the same culture and collective family lifestyle, this is affected by the thoughts, decisions and attitudes of men and the communal polity.

Although, an increasing number of women are taking part in politics, politicking in the country is still drawn on traditional values and interests. This is well shown in both the presidential and parliamentarian elections, where the election results have been seen on the ethnic demographics, in many part of the country. So, women still need the vote and support of men, who identify to women on the basis of ethnic, linguistic characteristics rather than on conscious political affiliation. This aspect has been played upon by the political leaders who have no other social development agenda to raise in their constituencies.

Women and Civil Society

While conflict brought devastation to human life, and breakdown of the social and tradtional systems of support, many women believe that it also brought new skills, knowledge and raised awareness through experiencing hardships. And this exposure has led to women seeking an alternative. One such alternative initiative has been women's groups and NGOs, which mostly started working as small Community Organziations in the late 1980's.

> War has been an awakening for many women. Women's awareness about their rights has increased more than at any time; they started their own projects like education, health and politics.
>
> *M. Haqooqmal*
>
> *State Minister of Women's Affairs, Kabul, 22, April, 05*

Through the creation of these women's groups, women forged new spaces within the limited choices they had, within the patriarchal society. They have also learned new skills, including negotiation, management and running of groups, and considering the essentials for the safety of their work. Most importantly, the exercise of "power with" developed their "power within" and enhanced their feeling of self-worthiness and self-confidence, in both contexts, through their experiences with other women and those in higher management positions (Zapata, 1999:92).

In Afghanistan today, many women in the government and the parliament come from these women's groups. Working in such groups has helped develop a good reputation within the community, allowing them more social political space within the male community as well.

Working with the community on education programmes in Paktia, I had the chance of meeting with the male tribal *Shura* leaders. They have encouraged me to elect myself for the upcoming election.

Interview 11, Kabul May 18, 05

There is continuous transformation within these groups, from goal orientation to strategic orientation. Although, the transformation process from "feminine" to "feminist", as Waylen (1992) terms it, is based on the development and socio-political approaches to women's issues, it is rather slow in Afghanistan, compared to women's groups in the neighbouring state of Tajikistan. This is so because of other important factors affecting such transfers like, high skills, better education and a more educated society, whose attitudes towards women's communal development is far more receptive as compared to Afghanistan.

The women's groups have their limitations, caused by, among other things, competition over resources, lack of adequate capable staff, which are, in most cases, lost to the international and UN organizations. And the general socio-political environment, which has been the reason for the fragmentation of the Afghan society along ethnic or linguistic lines. These mitigating factors are considered by women as the major obstacles blocking the way towards full cooperation with each other, and need to be addressed through more sustainable and protracted programmes.

Although, women belonging to these groups comprise a limited number of educated women within the Afghan society, their role as a bridge and as a means to reach thousands of other women through their previous experiences is vital, as a source of "empowerment". Based on these findings, it is inferred that women's groups can be one of the best avenues for women's "empowerment", which could be achieved through longer term investment, capacity building and full involvement in the reconstruction processes.

Conclusion

Reconstruction in Afghanistan, as else where in the world, is a new opportunity, where women's status as citizens and "empowerment" in the public domain can be consolidated through formation and reformation of new roles and laws.

Where historically, top-down state changes, which associated women's emancipation agenda with state polity, has failed in Afghanistan. In such cases, because the state was not able to foster a strong public base, it established a stronger bully around its territory to avoid expandability of its citizens. This led to interference in the form of internal and external extremism, taking the state back to regression, or any progress made to bring women in public life.

However, the institutional changes in the post-war era can be distinguished, as having a more wider public base, and new conscious raising among women and communities as compared to any other period in the history of women's "empowerment" in Afghanistan. These new changes and breakthrough can be associated with migrations, flourishing of NGOs, emergence of women's groups, and, finally the space and emergence of diversity of the Afghan civil society, and the voice of progressive women and men.

In order to ensure women's "empowerment" and their status as citizens, in the post-war reconstruction in a traditional society, such as Afghanistan, it is important for policy-makers and development interlocutors to consider the diversity of the Afghan society. As well, to recognize, the breakthrough in the complex power structure and traditional values around women. This specifically refers to women's groups and the civil society structure,

besides the institutional changes, which foster such environment and involve women in the political and policy related issues.

Notes and References

37.   This paper is an extract from the author's MA in Post-war Recovery studies from the York University.

38.   The Afghan Constitution (2003) value is family as "basic the cell of society".

39.   The veil Muslim women wear to cover their heads and the curves of the body.

40.   AFGHAN Constitution (2003), *article, 22, 24, 44, 5, 84.3* available on http://www.af/constitution/index.html.

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