

# The Female Face of Afghanistan



**Edited by  
Fiona Hodgson & Glyn Strong**

Picture by Anastasia Taylor-Lind

## The Editors

### Fiona Hodgson

Fiona Hodgson was elected a Vice President of the Conservative National Convention in 2009 and is a member of the Conservative Human Rights Commission. She is also the President of the Conservative Women's Organisation (CWO) having been Chairman from 2005-2008 and continues to help run the CWO Muslim Group which she set up.

Fiona works on a variety of women's issues especially in the context of developing and conflict countries.

She is a member of the All Party Group on Women, Peace and Security, Chairman of the Trustees of GAPS (Gender Action in Peace and Security), is a member of Oxfam's Association, a member of the Leadership Circle of Women for Women and on the Advisory Board of WPD (Widows for Peace through Democracy).

Her working background is in market research and small businesses. She has held a number of public appointments and worked voluntarily in the areas of health and animal welfare.



### Glyn Strong

Glyn Strong is a freelance writer, film-maker and media consultant ([www.glynstrong.co.uk](http://www.glynstrong.co.uk)). In 1994 she left journalism to work for the Armed Forces, spending lengthy periods in hostile environments, running civilian/military news teams in Bosnia and Kuwait and operating in the Falkland Islands, Hungary, Kosovo, Germany, Italy and Holland.

After several years with the Army she became Head of External Communication for the RAF before being appointed Assistant Director of Public Relations at the Ministry of Defence. Glyn left Whitehall in April 2007 to return to independent journalism and is a member of the International Committee of the CIOJ.

A graduate of Newcastle, Manchester and Leeds Universities she is a qualified teacher of English and Communication Studies and in 2002 was awarded an MA in Public Communication for her work on The Effect of Media Reportage on Combat Effectiveness and Gender. She has spent time in Afghanistan, Lebanon and Sudan researching and writing about women's rights issues.

She works independently, with broadcasters and distinguished photographers and with the charity for homeless ex-Service personnel, Veterans Aid ([www.veterans-aid.net](http://www.veterans-aid.net)).



## The Female Face of Afghanistan: Recommendations to a future UK Government

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Special thanks to the following photographers for allowing the use of their images in this publication.

Anastasia Taylor-Lind	<a href="http://www.anastasiataylorlind.com">www.anastasiataylorlind.com</a>
Tom Stoddart	<a href="http://www.tomstoddart.com">www.tomstoddart.com</a>
Paula Lerner	<a href="http://www.lernerphoto.com">www.lernerphoto.com</a>

# Introduction

*"In a society where the rights and potential of women are constrained, no man can be truly free.*

*He may have power, but he will not have freedom."* - Mary Robinson

Afghanistan, just a few hours away from London by air, is one of the harshest places on earth for women. Its landscape of savage beauty is one of despair for many who inhabit it and in terms of human rights the clock has been turned back to the dark ages for half the population. Ironically, for a country rarely out of the news, little is known about Afghanistan. The images of barren Helmand province where British troops live, fight and sometimes die are familiar, but the people whose country they occupy are virtually invisible.

This publication is not a work of academic rigour nor does it aspire to present a comprehensive picture or offer solutions.

It is simply a collection of writings by individuals who care about Afghanistan's people and, in particular, its women. Most of the contributors are female. Some are Afghan. Some are well known. Others are anonymous. Almost all at some time have lived, worked-in or visited Afghanistan

Most of the articles were written especially for this publication, but some were taken (with permission) from other sources.

The editors' aim is to highlight and illustrate the parlous position of women in Afghanistan and to make those in positions of authority pause for thought.

One of the reasons given by the US and the UK for going into Afghanistan was to liberate women from the oppression that they were suffering under the Taliban.

Somehow, in the fight for stability, this seems to have been forgotten. Perhaps we have lost sight of the fact that Afghan culture is very different from ours in the UK; we should not seek to change it to reflect our own, but create conditions in which all Afghans can shape and share in a society that allows them to achieve their full potential.

You may not agree with the views expressed in this publication, but they represent the personal convictions of our contributors and offer a variety of perspectives and recommendations.

The authors range from Afghan politicians to schoolgirls writing in secret; they include distinguished authors, former diplomats, students and representatives of NGOs. Their recommendations are summarised at the end of each section. Many are extremely busy individuals with punishing workloads. The fact that they took time to contribute to *The Female Face of Afghanistan* speaks volumes.

Afghanistan's women lost the most, and stand to gain the most, by politics and regime change. We hope that by illuminating some of the issues we can help, in a small way, to refocus on their needs. One of the most heartening aspects is that, in spite of all, the women of Afghanistan have not lost hope.

Finally we would like to say a heartfelt 'thank you' to everyone who has made this booklet possible - to all those who wrote or sourced articles, provided photographs or facilitated introductions; to Naweed Khan who inspired its production; to Lee Spender our publisher; to Vic Getz in Kabul for her amazing networking efforts and to all of you for taking the time to read ... and reflect on what you have read.

**Fiona Hodgson & Glyn Strong**

## Rory Stewart

Rory Stewart is the Ryan Family Professor of the Practice of Human Rights and the Director of the Carr Centre for Human Rights Policy at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. He spent a brief period as an officer in the British Army before joining the Foreign Office. In 2005 he founded an NGO, the Turquoise Mountain Foundation in Afghanistan, and moved to Kabul. He has travelled extensively, most prominently throughout Iraq and Afghanistan. His first book, *The Places in Between* was an account of his solo walk across Afghanistan in the winter of 2001-2002. It was a bestseller. Until 2009, when he took up his position at Harvard, Stewart lived in Kabul where he established, and then served as Chief Executive of, the Turquoise Mountain Foundation, whose mission it is to regenerate Afghanistan's traditional crafts and historic areas, creating jobs, skills, and a renewed sense of national identity. In October 2009 he was adopted as the Conservative Parliamentary Candidate for Penrith and The Borders.

“Afghanistan cannot be fixed by foreign engineers, as though it were a broken truck. Afghan women must play a leading role in making Afghanistan more prosperous, stable and humane.

The last seven years have seen extraordinary initiatives by and for Afghan women in education, health, politics and employment.

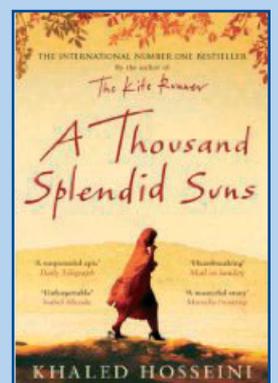
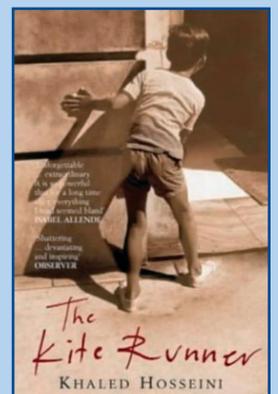
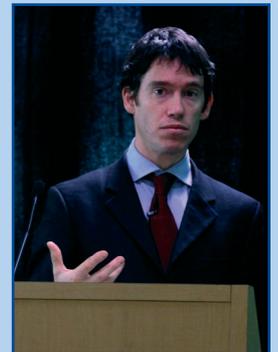
The international community must continue to support these positive developments – sensitively, collaboratively – but with courage and a long-term commitment to the rights, lives and interests of Afghan women.”

## Khaled Hosseini

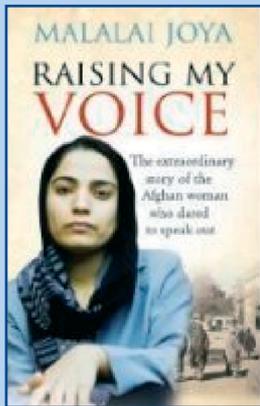
Khaled Hosseini was born in Kabul, in 1965. His father was a diplomat with the Afghan Foreign Ministry and his mother taught Farsi and History at a large high school in Kabul. In 1976, the Afghan Foreign Ministry relocated the Hosseini family to Paris. They were ready to return to Kabul in 1980, but by then Afghanistan had already witnessed a bloody communist coup and the invasion of the Soviet army. The Hosseinis sought, and were granted, political asylum in the United States. In September of 1980, Hosseini's family moved to San Jose, California. Hosseini graduated from high school in 1984 and enrolled at Santa Clara University where he earned a bachelor's degree in Biology in 1988. The following year, he entered the University of California-San Diego's School of Medicine, where he earned a Medical Degree in 1993. He completed his residency at Cedars-Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles. While in medical practice Hosseini began writing his first novel, *The Kite Runner*. This was followed in 2007 by his best seller *A Thousand Splendid Suns* about the tumultuous lives of two Afghan women. In 2006 he was named a goodwill envoy to UNHCR, the United Nations Refugee Agency. He has been working to provide humanitarian assistance in Afghanistan through The Khaled Hosseini Foundation.

“Depriving Afghan women of education is not a viable option. It will bankrupt the future of the country, and doom any prospects of Afghanistan becoming a prosperous and productive state. The education of women has to be a top priority in Afghanistan. It is a big slice of the solution pie to many of the socio-economic problems that ail Afghanistan.

If Afghanistan has any chance to become a prosperous country, it will require the full engagement of its deprived women and girls as part of the process, and for that to happen we have to increase women's access to the education sector. I hope the Afghan Government, along with assistance from the international community, makes the education of women one of the cornerstones of national reconstruction and development. In the end I believe that educated women will play a key role in leading Afghanistan toward a brighter future.”



Malalai Joya is the elected Member of Parliament for Farah province. She was suspended in 2006 for allegedly insulting her fellow MPs. Despite repeated appeals and protestations from the Inter-Parliamentary Union her case has not been heard and she has remained in limbo without salary or official protection. She has survived five assassination attempts. In July 2009 she was invited to the UK to promote her book 'Raising my Voice' from which the extract below is taken. [www.malalaijoya.com](http://www.malalaijoya.com)



*"More than seven years after the invasion by American and its allies, we are still faced with foreign occupation and an American-backed government filled with warlords who are just like the Taliban. Instead of putting these ruthless murderers on trial for war crimes, the United States and its allies placed them in positions of power, where they continue to terrorise ordinary Afghans.*

*You may be shocked to hear this, because the truth about Afghanistan has been hidden behind a smokescreen of words and images carefully crafted by the United States and its NATO allies and repeated without question by the Western media.*

*You may have been led to believe that once the Taliban was driven from power, justice returned to my country. Afghan women like me, voting and running for office, have been held up as proof that the United States has brought democracy and women's rights to Afghanistan.*

*But it is all a lie, dust in the eyes of the world."*

*The extract that follows is taken from a post-election article by Malalai Joya commissioned by the newspaper Frontline.*

### **War, occupation and terrorism: Afghanistan crashing into disaster**

My country has been a long-term victim of occupation, war and human catastrophe and the statistics speak for themselves about what a bleak future it is facing. Afghanistan is ranked 181st out of 182 countries in the Human Development Index 2009. It roils in a foment of women's rights tragedies, poverty and corruption - all behind a political smokescreen.

The root causes of this lie with the US and their fundamentalist puppets. The US and its allies invaded Afghanistan with many promises, one of them being to champion women's rights. But conditions for women have improved on paper only since the barbaric Taliban regime.

In the period before the rule of the fundamentalists in Afghanistan, between the 1960s-80s, women had more rights than they do today.



Teenage girls learn handicraft skills enabling them to produce beautiful traditional garments that are sold to generate income.

Picture: Anastasia Taylor-Lind

Rapes, abductions, murders, violence, forced marriages and violence are on the increase at a rate unprecedented in our history.

Recently, a 5-year-old girl was killed by a 40-year-old man in Saripul province when she resisted his attempt to rape her. A 14-year-old girl was gang-raped by warlords in Northern Afghanistan.

An 18-year-old mother was stabbed to death due to domestic violence in Balkh province.

In the absence of a judicial system that protects women, a large number of them commit self-immolation to escape their miseries and the rate of self-immolations is rising in many provinces. Most recently a 25-year-old girl set herself on fire in Jawzjan province. A single hospital in Kabul reported that 600 suicide attempt cases were referred to it in 2008.

The new Shiite rape law, which created a chorus of condemnation around the globe, has been secretly passed with just slight alterations in tone.

The essence of the law remains the same; women are to submit to their husband's sexual pleasures (i.e. rape is permitted if she is disobedient). It saves a rapist from persecution, by paying so called "blood money", women have to get permission from their husband's before leaving their homes for work or any other purpose and the guardianship of children is granted to fathers and grandfathers.



LEFT:  
Self immolation is on the increase among desperate and despairing women and young girls.

Picture: Tom Stoddart

This law has been finally signed by Karzai to keep the Shiites extremist leaders happy – leaders who are led by prominent fundamentalists such as Sheikh Asif Mohseni and Mohammad Mohaqiq. As Human Rights Watch puts it "Karzai has made an unthinkable deal to sell Afghan women out in the support of fundamentalists in the August 20 election."

By signing this law, Karzai has harshly betrayed women. By compromising with such dirty elements and sworn enemies of the Afghan people he has proved that his government is no different from the barbaric Taliban or fundamentalist Northern Alliance

Severe poverty is also hitting Afghanistan very hard. It is so extreme that people sell their children for as little as \$10 for a piece of bread! Over 80% of the nation lives below the poverty line.

(\*Reproduced by kind permission of Malalai Joya and 'Frontline' - the newspaper of The Frontline Club. [www.thefrontlineclub.com](http://www.thefrontlineclub.com))

Fatima Gailani has been serving as the President of the Afghan Red Crescent Society since 2004. She is the daughter of Pir Sayed Ahmed Gailani, the leader of the National Islamic Front of Afghanistan who fought against the Soviet occupation of

Afghanistan in the 1980s. After graduating from Malalai High School in Kabul, Ms Gailani obtained a BA and subsequently an MA in Persian Literature and Sufism in 1978 from the National University of Iran. She also earned an MA in Islamic Studies from the Muslim College in London in 1994. She lived in exile during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and acted as spokesperson in London for the Afghan Mujahedin. She attended the Bonn Conference on Afghanistan in 2001. After her return to Afghanistan she was chosen as a delegate to the Emergency Loya Jirga – Grand Council – of June 2002 and was appointed as a constitution drafting and ratifying commissioner. Ms Gailani is the author of two books (Mosques of London and a biography of Mohammed Mosa Shafi).

### Afghan Red Crescent Society

I can't help but compare the situation of Afghan women today to that of only a few years ago, under the Taleban rule, Civil War/Mujahedin's Government, before that during the ex Soviet Occupation and specially with the time I grew up, got my education and was dreaming of my future as a working woman with the anticipation of being a full member of my society with equal rights and equal access.

Thinking about rural women, nothing has changed to improve their status in their society. They were confined at home all those years; they are still confined. All important decisions of political and religious base were taken by men. Women would not even dare to question or reason with their men. If they ended up in a refugee camp in Iran or Pakistan, or if they had to leave their rural life and end up in a two room accommodation in big cities like Kabul, Herat or Mazar, they just accepted their destiny.

We also had educated women who were strong, well informed and who felt equal to any man or woman in the world. These women knew their rights; they knew very well that their situation was a privileged one, and they knew how important it was that this privilege should reach every woman in every village of Afghanistan.

One thing they were all sure about was the power of education for all Afghans - especially for women.

From 1964 (under the rule of King Zahir Shah) to the Communist coup of 1978, changes for women gradually but naturally found their way from Kabul to the capitals of important provinces and eventually to villages.

Slowly you could see new faces of women on the political scene, especially in the field of education. Women would compete with men for a seat in parliament. Women would be seen in the Senate and eventually in the Cabinet.

From 1964 till the end of King Zahir Shah's era is called the decade of democracy.

***We were students then, full of life and ready to get from the best governmental positions to seats in the upper and lower house of the parliament, and many of us would see ourselves in doctors' and military uniforms.***

***Radio stations had women newscasters. People of villages would name their daughters after prominent women, which meant women's names, faces and voices were being heard and seen in remote areas.***

***What happened? The destructive power of war is known only to those unfortunate people who experience it.***

Endless wars destroyed many things in Afghanistan. The small progress that women had achieved was not spared either. What is to be done? Women in Afghanistan are optimistic for their future, I am one of them. What is missing is a clear policy for women's future, a practical Afghan policy with the help and expertise of our friends.

## Recommendations

- Why not an international conference similar to those for Afghan politics, economy and reconstruction, but this one only for women and women's issues? This conference could look into all aspects of women's life in Afghanistan such as education, health, laws and regulations, political participation, skills training, etc.
- In this conference we should give opportunity to Afghan women themselves to come up with suggestions.
- We can invite success stories from the Islamic countries, those countries with similar problems and similar remedies.
- Maybe we will be able to find practical ways within the boundary of our faith or even our tradition.
- Open doors for educated, semi-educated and even those who are illiterate but need to be let into a situation that can change their life financially by teaching skills and motivating people to use them.
- Provide literacy facilities all over Afghanistan.

In short our support to Afghan women should change from a mere slogan to a practical situation.



*"The destructive power of war is known only to those unfortunate people who experience it."*

Picture: RAWA

Anne Greenstock, Patron of UNIFEM UK, and Vice Chair of Women for Women International UK, is the wife of Sir Jeremy Greenstock, UK Permanent Representative at the United Nations from 1998 to 2003 and instrumental in the passing of SC

Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security. She was also a senior gender advisor with the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq in 2004.

*"How can a country improve when 50% of its population are silenced?  
It is like a bird with only one wing." - Malalai Joya*

At the end of a terrible period for the British Army in Helmand province, we are all reminded that security is the paramount issue for the people of Afghanistan. With the best will in the world, a women's NGO such as the one I represent, cannot operate in a violent and insecure environment. Defeating the Taliban, or its most radical elements, is one of the keys to stability in Afghanistan and I would not suggest otherwise. But we need to acknowledge that the long-term future of Afghanistan lies with the people of that country and not with the external security forces. When I say 'people' I am referring to 100% of the population.

Afghan women form part of a conservative culture where submission to the will of the men in their families and villages is taken as read and where questioning of the system often evokes a violent response. But these women also hold the key to creating a more stable, more democratic and more prosperous Afghanistan.

The Afghan people are no different from the nationals of other war-torn countries. They want peace and security, they want educational opportunities and economic prosperity for themselves and their children, and they want their country back.

DfID recently launched its £510 million Afghanistan Country Plan for 2009-2013 with one of its stated aims to 'strengthen focus on gender by building partnerships within the Government of Afghanistan and with other donors'. If assistance to local communities continues to be channelled through central Government, experience shows that very little of that assistance will reach the grassroots, let alone the women.

### Recommendations

- Direct aid to local women's organisations, such as Women for Women International, which works directly with women, using only Afghan women operatives in their country operations. Its objective is to turn women from victims to survivors to active citizens – and it should be achievable.

Experience shows that women will put the interests of their families before everything else; give a woman \$10 and she will almost always spend that money for the benefit of her family – rarely does this mean buying a weapon.

- Training. One in three Afghans suffers from severe poverty. In most villages there is a shortage of food, water and medical supplies. Small wonder that women can be persuaded to hand over one of their sons to the Taliban, in exchange for guaranteed supplies of food to feed their remaining children.
- Training women, inter alia, in sustainable agricultural practice and using micro-credit to help fledgling agricultural projects get off the ground is an effective tool in removing the pressure that the Taliban are able to exert. This is not a straightforward solution.

- Village elders need to be persuaded that the prosperity of their communities can be improved if women are allowed to form part of the work force; women need rights-awareness training to enable them to deal with the male-dominated environment within their communities; violence against women needs to be highlighted and the means provided to address it.
- Healthcare. With a 1 in 5 chance of mothers surviving delivery, Afghanistan is still the second most dangerous place for women to give birth. Afghan infants still face a 25 percent risk of dying before their fifth birthdays. Efforts should be made to improve access to medical facilities especially in rural communities.
- Opposition to discriminatory legislation. Afghanistan is a signatory to CEDAW – the UN Convention to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women. We should be supporting efforts to review the Shiite Personal Status Law, which would affect up to 20% of Afghan women.

This draft law which was recently approved by both chambers of the Afghan Parliament, places severe restrictions on women's freedom of movement, denying them the right to leave their homes except for a "legitimate purpose", requires women to submit to the sexual desires of their husbands, thus legitimising marital rape, and promotes forms of discrimination against women in the areas of marriage, divorce, inheritance and access to education which are not consistent with international human rights standards, particularly standards regarding women's rights.

- Mentoring of Afghan Women MPs. There are currently 91 women MPs in the Afghan Parliament, representing slightly more than the 25% women's quota. These women deserve as much support as possible. There are a number of parliamentary mentoring programmes in place – some funded by national governments, some by UN agencies. Funding for mentoring programmes for Afghan women MPs should be strongly encouraged.



RAWA.org  
*Afghan infants still face a 25 per cent risk of dying before their fifth birthday.  
Picture: RAWA*

## Barbara Stocking

Barbara Stocking is Chief Executive of Oxfam GB. She joined as Director in May 2001. Oxfam is a humanitarian, development and campaigning agency, whose purpose is to work with others to overcome poverty and suffering. During the last six years,

Barbara has led Oxfam's response to humanitarian crises in Afghanistan, Iraq, Sudan, for the Tsunami and the Pakistan Earthquake. She has strengthened Oxfam's campaigning (e.g. Make Trade Fair, Education) and pushed for Oxfam's scale up of development work e.g. on Livelihoods and HIV/Aids. Most recently Oxfam has begun campaigning on climate change because of its impact on poor people. She was awarded a DBE in the 2008 Queen's Birthday Honours List.

### Oxfam GB

Afghanistan is one of the most harrowing places in the world to be a woman. The average life expectancy of an Afghan woman is 44 years. A vast number of women in rural areas do not have access to basic healthcare; on average every half an hour, one Afghan woman dies in childbirth and another dies of tuberculosis. Access to schooling is little better; two million girls do not go to school and just 15 women out of every 100 are literate. Nearly eight out of every ten women are subject to forced marriages and more than half of girls are married before the legal marriage age of 16.

Though there have been positive changes in the situation of women since the fall of the Taliban, these improvements have been patchy and precarious, and have fallen far short of the promises made by the international community and Afghan government. For many women in the insecure south and east of the country, what little gains were made have already been eroded by the spread of the insurgency.

To improve the lives of Afghan women, urgent action is required to expand their access to quality, basic services. According to a 2005 Lancet report nearly 78 percent of maternal deaths are preventable.

Most women in Afghanistan, as many as 80 per cent, give birth without the help of a skilled birthing attendant, and only a third receives any medical care at all during pregnancy.

Efforts to train community-based midwives have been highly successful but if we are to have any hope of reducing maternal mortality, these programs must be rapidly scaled up.

Concerted efforts are also required to improve the quality of care provided by rural clinics and to ensure that a greater number are staffed by qualified, female health-workers.

Though more Afghan girls are in school now than ever before, there is still only one girl to every two boys at primary level and female attendance sharply decreases at secondary level.

To address this, there should be expanded training programs for female teachers at all levels and the provision of incentives for them to work in remote, rural areas. In the northern province of Badakhshan, Oxfam supports qualified female teachers to work in remote communities. In a single primary school, the enrolment of girls rapidly increased from just 70 to over a thousand.

Improving access to basic services can make a vital difference to the lives of Afghan women and girls, but such efforts must go hand in hand with efforts to secure the fundamental rights of women enshrined in the Afghan constitution.

This means ensuring that more women hold decision-making positions at all levels of government; presently just four percent of sitting judges are female, six percent of prosecutors are female and there are no female members of the Supreme Court council. It also means far greater efforts to ensure that women can have an active role in public life, at all levels, free from threats, intimidation and violence that is becoming increasingly prevalent.

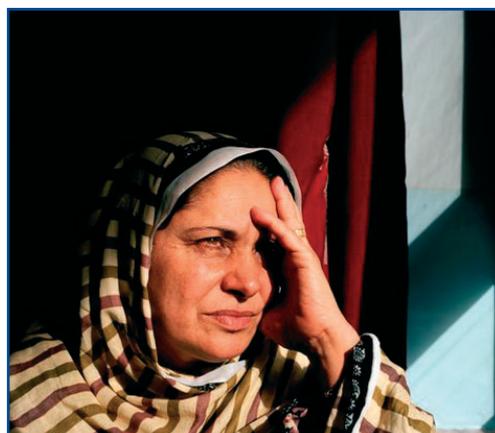
Eight years ago, the international community had the ambition and the promises to secure fundamental rights for women and girls – but lacked many of the resources. Now, it is a question mark as to whether the ambition is still there.

As the security has deteriorated, donors have narrowed their priorities and the status of women has fallen to the bottom of the list.

Many power holders – both within the Afghan government as well as the international community – pay little more than lip service to the needs and rights of half of the population. Now is the time for a genuine and sustained commitment to the women and girls of Afghanistan. For many women, hour by hour, day by day, it is a matter of life and death.

### Recommendations

- International donors and the government of Afghanistan should dramatically increase the number of female health workers, particularly nurses and midwives, to improve women's access to health services. Although women now make up nearly half of the country's 20,000 community health workers, high demand for specialised services persists throughout the country due to the dire health conditions of women.
- Increase investment in education systems and improve access to education at all levels by recruiting, training and seeking to retain more teachers, particularly women. Teacher training programs must be scaled up to address the shortage of qualified teachers at all levels. Incentive programs should be enhanced and expanded enabling more teachers, particularly women, to work in rural areas. Efforts to construct school buildings for the roughly 6,000 schools that lack them must be expedited. Incentives for attendance should also be expanded; a universal mid-day meal, which would cost \$200 million per annum, has been proven to increase enrolment rates, improve student performance and help address child malnutrition.
- Increase the number of women serving in government institutions and ensure that they actively participate in decision-making processes. The government should adopt and implement affirmative action and professional development policies aimed at correcting the gender imbalance at all levels. Marginalisation, discrimination or harassment of women should be countered with zero tolerance and, in more serious cases, punitive action as part of larger efforts to ensure that women in government are part of decision-making processes.
- The Ministry of Public Health, with donor support, should provide incentives for female health workers to significantly increase their numbers and expand successful pilot programs to train community-based nurses and midwives to ensure adequate and balanced coverage of basic health needs.



*Courageous women's rights activists like 'M' are the country's future  
Picture: Anastasia Taylor-Lind.*

Horia Mosadiq works for Amnesty International on Afghanistan, travelling between London and Kabul. Previously, she was Director of the Afghanistan Human Rights Research and Advocacy Consortium. She has also worked as an advisor to the

Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, as a political officer at the Canadian Embassy in Kabul and as a journalist in Afghanistan and Pakistan. A former member of the Afghanistan Media Commission, Horia writes articles for Afghan media and is regularly interviewed about human rights, women's affairs and media.

Amnesty  
International

The widespread use of violence over the past 29 years has caused massive physical and social upheaval for the people of Afghanistan. The long-term effects of militarisation and the pervasive culture of violence have had devastating effects on all Afghan people, but especially on women and children. The continuing threats to security are a failure by the Afghan Government and the international community to protect the Afghan people and to provide a secure environment for Afghan women and children.

Afghanistan is a state party to a number of major human rights treaties, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT), the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC).

The US Government and the international community promised Afghan women that they would uphold their rights. Many Afghan women believe that the international community has not put enough pressure on the Afghan Government to meet the international human rights standards and obligations to protect and maintain women's rights.

Meanwhile there have been some attempts by the Afghan Government, between 2002- 2005, to improve the rights of Afghan women. This has been done through involving women at different levels of decision making. For example, participation of 14% female representatives in the emergency Loya Jirga, from 1,500 representatives who were elected, to establish an Interim Administration for Afghanistan in June 2002.

In January 2004 Afghanistan's new Constitution was approved by more than 500 representatives and around 17% were women. The new Constitution re-affirms that women and men are entitled to equal rights and guarantees the age of marriage of girls at 16 years.

The new Afghan Constitution states that 25% of the parliament members should be women.

Since the fall of the Taliban, women and girls are back at school and work. From six million children who are attending schools in Afghanistan between 30- 35% of them are girls. Compare this to the Taliban era with less than a million students and no girls at school.

***However, while welcoming all the steps to promote and protect the rights of women and girls taken by the Afghan Government and the international community in Afghanistan, it is a fact that after the parliamentary elections in 2005 both the Afghan Government as well as the international community started believing that the women of Afghanistan had been liberated and their task accomplished. In fact greater challenges for Afghan women remain.***

The challenges for the Afghan women are mostly women's equal political participation at the decision making level, including the judiciary, to be able to improve the situation of women and girls in their access to education, health, protection and justice. Understanding that Afghanistan is a state party to a number of human rights and international treaties the Government of Afghanistan has undertaken legal obligations to ensure every man, woman and child in Afghanistan will not be subject to discrimination on the ground of tribe, ethnicity, class, religion, sex or age.

Afghanistan is still facing an internal armed conflict and is ruled by a fragile government. Regardless of periodic peace and changes of regimes in the past years a consistent feature of Afghan life is that women live with a high risk of violence and discrimination.

There are indeed considerable and substantive measures at State level to improve the position of women in Afghanistan, but a significant constraint to such initiatives remains in the form of the failure to provide physical security for Afghan women.

The climate for enabling women and men to speak out freely is inhospitable. Private armed groups, under the leadership of powerful regional leaders, continue to exert *de facto* control and engage in factional clashes.

Despite pledging allegiance to the government, local officials are reported to have close connections with regional armed leaders, who are in control of large parts of Afghanistan.

Despite the existing guarantees for the equal rights of men and women, in practice the discrimination exists even at the judicial decision-making processes.

The practice of violence against women is tolerated at the highest level of the judiciary and government. People who are accused of violence against women are rarely prosecuted or often punished lightly – for example, simply being advised by the judge not to use violence or, in extreme cases of violation, warned that they may face short term imprisonment.

The judicial system in Afghanistan, after eight years of frequent efforts by the international community, is lacking proper professionalism and political will to investigate cases of violence against women, such as rape and domestic violence and prosecution of the perpetrators.

The international and donor community should hold the Afghan Government accountable for its performance against the commitment and promises it made nationally and internationally - and provide more support for the establishment of a responsive mechanism to protect women against human rights abuses.

Women activists are working with marginalised groups, particularly women and children in Afghanistan, through health, education, skill building and microfinance programs.

Many Afghan women in parliament face discrimination, threats and harassment from their male colleagues and are trying hard to amend the discriminatory laws against women there. Female parliamentarians are involved in high level advocacy at the parliamentary and Afghan Government level to make sure that women's rights are not compromised at the law making level. The bigger challenge for female MPs is that they are not able to enjoy the same level of authority and power as male MPs do.

Women who lead organisations, as well as women's rights activists, are also engaged in awareness raising about child marriage, family planning, girls' education, safe motherhood etc. - all things that are not accepted by many men in Afghanistan - particularly mullahs and other religious people. The risk of a women activist being attacked for her awareness raising activities is high, particularly in rural areas.

Talking publicly about issues such as family violence, child marriage, dowry and family planning is risky because it's believed to be a private matter.

Female-run organisations are also providing Safe Houses in some big cities where many women victims of domestic violence, forced marriages and rape are sheltered. Women victims who dare to complain against domestic and other forms of violence in Afghanistan are aware that they are at risk, but they do it in the hope of receiving some support from the police or judiciary.



Sitara Achakzai – Assassinated  
Picture: Paula Lerner

Despite this climate of intimidation and fear numerous

women's organisations, some female MPs, groups of female journalists and human rights activists are determined to continue working to defend human rights and women's rights.

Women are disproportionately affected by violence during and after conflicts. In Afghanistan the Taliban regime formally collapsed in late 2001 but the ongoing

conflict with the Taliban, factional violence, growing anti-government attacks and targeted violence towards national and international aid workers is contributing to the present state of conflict.

In April 2009 Sitara Achekzai a women's rights activists and the Secretary of the Kandahar Provincial Council was assassinated on her doorstep in Kandahar city. The Taliban claimed responsibility for her murder.

### Recommendations

- The Afghan Government should ensure that the perpetrators of human rights violations against women and human rights defenders do not benefit from any legal measures exempting them from criminal prosecution or conviction. It should provide means of protection for Afghan women particularly for the Women Human Rights Defenders and bring to justice the perpetrators who target them.
- The international community, especially the donor community, should take an active role in supporting Afghan women in both at the government and at society level, and put pressure on the Afghan Government to recognise that violence against women is a crime within the civil and family law.
- The UN and international donor community should hold the Afghan Government accountable for the promises made under the national documents as such Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS), Afghanistan Compact, JCEMB and other promises that were made during London and Paris conferences.



'F' from Goreshk is educated and feisty with a keen sense of humour. Her husband beats her and after many years of marriage took a younger wife without telling her.

Picture: Anastasia Taylor-Lind

Brita Fernandez Schmidt is Director of Operations for Women for Women International, an organisation that mobilises women to change their lives through a holistic approach that addresses the unique needs of women in conflict and post-conflict environments. Previously she led the programmes and policy work of another women's rights organisation, Womankind Worldwide. From 2003 to 2008 Brita was Chair of the Gender & Development Network. Brita is an adviser to Widows for Peace and Democracy and a supporter of Women for Refugee Women.

For well over a generation Afghanistan has been a country wracked by violence and war. From the Soviet invasion of 1979, through the regimes of the Mujahedin and the Taliban, to the fighting we see today, between the Western-backed government of Hamid Karzai and a resurgent Taliban, armed conflict and disorder have been a constant feature of the history of the country.

For the Afghan population, and its women in particular, the result has been devastating. The overthrow in 1992 of the Soviet-backed administration saw the end of a government that had promoted the principle of women's rights. However, very little changed for poor rural women in what is a very traditional and conservative country.

Widowhood and impoverishment have been the lot of many, while thousands have had to bring up their children in refugee camps abroad. Today, one in eight women in Afghanistan dies from pregnancy-related causes and although one million girls were able to return to school in 2002, after the overthrow of the fundamentalist Taliban regime (which regarded education for girls as 'un-Islamic' and banned women from holding most jobs), girls' schools are being burnt down, and female pupils attacked by militants who believe they should not be educated.

Today, while rebel groups form and soldiers shoot at "target zones", women struggle to carry on with their lives, feed their children and families, and recover from year after year of attacks, deaths and deprivation.

***Relief through aid may bring short-term relief to Afghan civilians / women in need of basic supplies – but only if it reaches them.***

***No matter how many millions of pounds, dollars and Euros are poured into aiding Afghanistan and its people, a pressing fact remains: rarely will aid reach the hands of those for whom it was sent.***

As Steve Masty, former head of international charity CARE in Kabul states, "Afghans seriously believe that the \$16 billion in aid received since

2001 has been stolen or wasted [by corrupt officials]".

Yet despite the abysmal figures and continued failures of international communities to bring peace and stability to Afghanistan, Women for Women International (WfWI) believes there is a clear, easy, yet oft neglected way to help Afghanistan develop, grow and prosper from within and that is through investing in the safety, security and socio-economic strengthening of women.

In 2008, WfWI surveyed 1,500 women in the provinces of Balkh, Herat, Kabul, Kapisa, Nangahar, Parwan and Wardak of Afghanistan as part of our Stronger Women, Stronger Nations report series. Our aim was to better understand the biggest issues facing Afghanistan from women's perspectives: the results were both surprising and reassuring:

- Women are aware of the discrimination they face, and value knowledge of their rights.
- Women have significant awareness about the state and politics.
- Social ills cannot be fixed without peace and security.
- Women are hopeful about the future.

Despite peace and security being the most pressing concern of almost two-thirds of those surveyed and despite official reluctance to address widespread domestic violence and the failures of leadership at the local level, where women's voices most need to be heard, women are hopeful.

Women for Women International has ample evidence that in peace and during war, women hold communities together.

Women for Women International

Its research shows that women who have received some form of rights education feel empowered and are able to develop strategies to address problems and improve their lives and their communities.

In this regard, the survey in Afghanistan affirms what WfWI has learned over the past 15 years: Investing in women at the grassroots level improves their access to economic opportunities, civic participation and hope for the future of their country. Based on its work and research in Afghanistan WfWI has formulated the following recommendations.

## **Recommendations**

- Impunity particularly in relation to violence against women needs to be urgently addressed. Afghans need to be able to rely on rule of law and not rule of the gun.
- The international community, in cooperation with their Afghan counterparts, needs to focus on building professional security forces under civilian leadership. More resources must be invested in training of a functioning Afghan military and police force that follows clear guidelines and adheres to human rights, particular women's rights. Afghans must be able to rely on local and national bodies for their security and rule of law.
- No security without development and no development without security - Afghans need to see immediately that peace pays off and their lives improve as a result of stability. Without tangible improvements investing in peace becomes less attractive.
- Direct aid to those who need it. Investment needs to strengthen the government at the same time as strengthening civil society. Aid flows need to be monitored in particular with respect to how it impacts on women's lives.

### **Message from Sweeta Noori, Country Director Afghanistan, Women for Women International.**

“Right now I can see that there are two Afghanistans, one that is developing and progressing and one that is deteriorating and a scary place for women. On the one hand there is a Ministry of Women's Affairs and a 25% quota for female members of parliament in the constitution. On the other, the poorest women are suffering from increasing domestic violence, self-immolation and illiteracy, and are used as tools for conflict resolution between families. We know that lasting change will require gender roles and attitudes in Afghanistan and any other country of conflict, to be transformed, and the views of women incorporated into the male-dominated political processes so that they share equally in shaping and being responsible for the future of their country.”

### Message from Zainab Salbi, Co-Founder and CEO

“In the past 15 years, Women for Women International has learned that along with the extreme challenges women face in the midst of and aftermath of wars, there is a window of opportunity for women to redefine their rights. This window of opportunity takes place during the process of negotiating peace and rebuilding nations. WfWI has learned that this opportunity can be harvested if:

- There is commitment of leadership to social change.
- Women gain access to economic resources and renegotiate their decision making power in their household, community, and society.
- Women become socially aware, organising themselves in groups and articulating their needs.

Additionally, WfWI has also learned that women in stable societies can be mobilised. While the challenges faced in Afghanistan are daunting, improved security is a necessary condition on which everything else is predicated and should be prioritised as such.

Sustainable improvements will require long term commitments from stakeholders within the country, as well as from international , other governments, humanitarian agencies, NGOs and private donors. The ultimate position of women in post-conflict Afghanistan will in large measure determine the course of the nation.”



*Zainab Salbi (right) is the CEO of Women International and is the author of Between Two Worlds and The Other Side of War. She founded WfWI in 1993 and since then the organisation has helped tens of thousands of women survivors of war and civil strife to rebuild their lives.*

Dr Sarah Fane is the chairman of Afghan Connection. Inspired by a gap year working in rural India, she decided to switch from her degree course in French and Latin to study medicine at Bristol University. Her elective was spent in the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan, where she met with the Guildford Surgical Team. She returned with them the following year to Pakistan, and worked from a Mujahedin border camp, seeing female patients from the surrounding refugee camps. Ten years later, having married, had four children, and done various hospital jobs between children, she was asked to go to the Panjshir Valley, Afghanistan, to assess a mother and child clinic. The visit and the people she met inspired her to set up this charity.

What is your dream? *“My dream is to have a good education, to study hard and to be a doctor, so I can take part in my country’s reconstruction”* - the words of a young girl in Grade 9 at Jari Shah Baba High School for Girls in Kishem, Northern Afghanistan. She had walked one and a half hours that morning to reach her school, where she would receive four hours education. The school has to operate in shifts as there are not enough teachers or classrooms for all the 1,350 girls now attending. None of the girls has a mother who can read or write. Over 100 of the girls are married and most of these have children. They ask me to build a kindergarten and to provide supervision for these offspring. Even the husbands are recognising the economic benefits of having a literate wife.

Just down the road we are building 20 classrooms at a school for 2,800 girls. Things are changing, there is a thirst for education and more and more girls are attending.

The new buildings house science laboratories, computers and libraries and school children from the surrounding area flock to share these resources. They want to learn science, to study computer skills - they want to have jobs, to teach, become engineers, doctors, journalists and above all to play a part in the reconstruction of their beloved country.

children who are coming for an education. Men, led by a former commander from the war against Russia, Sayed Oberdin, fight not each other, or the Taliban or the foreign troops, but for the right for their daughters to be educated.

From illiterate families a new generation of educated children are emerging and this year 35 girls are heading off to university. The first girl to graduate from university - the daughter of Sayed Oberdin - completed her course in Agriculture this year and is bringing her skills to her local villages.

*“Women are made for homes or graves” - Afghan saying*

They all show huge desire and determination to get an education - and they are all too aware of its dependency on security and peace.

They know that girls in the South have been sprayed with acid on their way to school, that schools have been closed and burnt down and that teachers and girls have been threatened and killed. Yet they say “It is our right to come to school”.

In the distant valley of Worsaj, remote and beautiful in the foothills of the Hindu Kush, a small miracle is taking place. We have built four schools here for the hundreds of

The teachers asked us to build a surrounding wall for the school to protect the girls and make it secure - I agreed if they would allow the girls to play sport. They kept their promise and these girls run, skip and play volleyball in their break times. This is a major breakthrough for these girls.

Since the fall of the Taliban millions of children have enrolled in schools. However, with 80 per cent of schools destroyed during the years of war, many teachers killed or fled overseas, a total lack of infrastructure and teacher training during the fighting, the system was not ready for the influx. This is a large contributor to the high drop-out rates.

Many leave for economic reasons and social reasons - early marriage being prevalent, and traditional views on education for women preventing many from studying after puberty.

However, distance of schools from villages, with security playing a big part in this, shortage of female teachers (fathers not wishing post-pubertal daughters to be taught by men) and poor quality of teaching and learning environment are significant contributing factors. These are the issues we must address.

We must invest in these children and especially in the girls! Education is the key to change in Afghanistan but is totally dependent on security. Once you educate the women, you always see dramatic improvements - it affects poverty, birthrates, child and maternal mortality rates to name but a few indicators

As part of an EU-funded awareness programme, we have twinned 20 Afghan

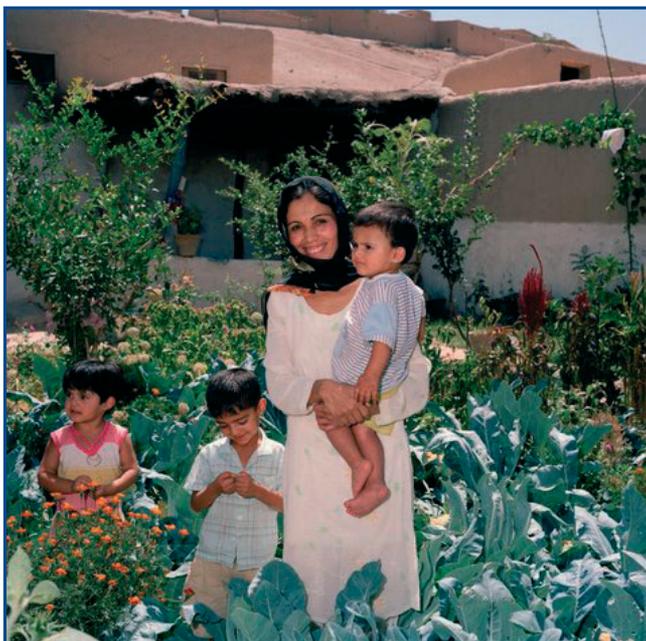
schools to schools in the UK. Once a year, the children in Afghanistan

come down to Kabul from their villages and take part in a live video link with our children across the UK. A boy from an English school asked an Afghan girl what was difficult about being a girl in her country. She replied "Each day when I walk to school I am threatened with burning, I am afraid, but I will not give up the opportunity to go to school."

The desire and the determination are there; the numbers are increasing and it is up to us to invest in these children. Too many of them study in dangerous and atrocious environments and too many do not study at all.

## Recommendations

- Security - without security, the schools cannot continue to function
- Investment in education - the children need a proper, secure working environment, a roof over their heads and equipped schools.
- Teacher training - massive investment is needed in teacher training to bring up the standards of education. Salaries need to be higher to encourage more people to become teachers



*Seeds of hope - a woman's kitchen garden rich with fruit and vegetables enables her family to enjoy a healthy diet throughout Afghanistan's harsh winters. 'N's husband is ill and unable to work.*

*Picture: Anastasia Taylor-Lind*

Katrin Fakiri is the Managing Director, Microfinance Investment Support Facility for Afghanistan (MISFA). It was set up in 2003, at the invitation of the Afghan Government, to get donor coordination right from the start and avoid the counter-productive efforts that have emerged from conflicting donor objectives in other post-conflict situations. MISFA was the first facility of its kind, pooling diverse donor funding mechanisms and converting them into streamlined, flexible support to microfinance institutions in Afghanistan, tailored to local priorities and accompanied by technical assistance and strong performance monitoring. In March 2006, MISFA registered as a limited liability non-profit company whose sole shareholder is the Ministry of Finance of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan. [www.misfa.org.af](http://www.misfa.org.af)

Intentionally or not, the international community's presence in Afghanistan is seen as being most closely linked to its military presence and political influence. This perception, both globally and from within Afghanistan, is drowning out whatever progress is achieved towards the country's reconstruction and development. As a result it is becoming more difficult for donor governments to convince their constituents to continue supporting Afghanistan

This could have an adverse effect on development programs, such as microfinance, that have been quietly and steadily contributing to economic growth in rural and urban communities; as well as to the socio-economic participation of Afghan women, who make up more than 50 percent of the population.

Outside the purview of mainstream media, microfinance has provided financial means to poor and marginalised Afghans to start or support micro enterprises that can provide them with a stable source of income and improve their quality of life.

Since 2006, when the microfinance sector was created by the Afghan Government and the donor community, the sector has been creeping up to the half-a-million mark in total number of clients: 442,986 by end of June 2009. Sixty percent of this total number are women who, under the Taliban, would not have been allowed outside their homes, let alone allowed to borrow money to start a small business.

In context, such a development is quite revolutionary - for Afghan women, on

this scale, to have as much access to economic opportunities that, in many cases, transform them into decision-makers within their families and communities.

The continuing progress of microfinance has shown a positive impact on the economic participation of Afghan women and how they are perceived by their family, neighbours and society as a whole.

An independent study recently commissioned by the Microfinance Investment Support Facility for Afghanistan found that women microfinance clients do not only help improve their household's income, they also reported that their loans help their families gain more access to better basic services, such as safe drinking water, health facilities, electricity and safe cooking fuel.

As a result they have decision making and purchasing powers in their households and an improved social status in their communities.

At the macro level, the success of Afghanistan's microfinance sector is likewise remarkable, considering that it is in its infancy, compared to some counterparts in the region - Bangladesh, Pakistan, India.

Even more remarkable is the fact that microfinance sectors in other Muslim-majority countries are not hindered as Afghanistan's is by the strong influence of religious fundamentalists, who label microfinance as un-Islamic.



Two Afghan women who have benefited from help by MISFA.  
Picture: Anastasia Taylor-Lind

***While securing peace and stability is the foremost objective, any long-term policy on Afghanistan must include continued support of its microfinance sector. Moreover, the highest officials of the Afghan government must be encouraged to communicate to the Afghan public, on a national scale, its full backing of microfinance as a tool to reduce poverty and generate more jobs and income opportunities across the country. This would help neutralise the negative characterisation of microfinance propagated by religious fundamentalists and other detractors.***

Another policy recommendation is to investigate other areas of economic activities that can lead to greater opportunities for female participation. As things stand, Afghan women, due to strong cultural constraints, are limited to the traditional trades of carpet-weaving, sewing, embroidery and crafts making. Consequently, competition among female entrepreneurs producing the same products becomes stiff, resulting in lower economic returns for such women-oriented activities.

## Recommendations

- Continue investing in microfinance and other similar development initiatives that help Afghan women become active participants in the economy and major decision makers in their homes. As a consequence of women becoming microfinance clients, their households not only earn higher incomes, their families also gain more access to better basic services, such as safe drinking water, health facilities, electricity and safe cooking fuel.
- Bilateral and multilateral support for microfinance through the Government of Afghanistan must include a commitment from the highest officials to publicly promote microfinance nationwide as a government program intended to create more jobs and income opportunities for Afghans - especially women - and help them out of poverty.
- The Government must also be tasked to remove barriers that

In addition, there are very few non-financial services, such as capacity building and market linkages designed for females. As such, the skills building of Afghan women who want to be serious entrepreneurs is low and slow.

There is a general acceptance from the international forces in Afghanistan that there is no military or political solution in sight that can bring about the changes desired by its population. This is because Afghans are worn out by war and conflict.

Policies on Afghanistan must therefore be invested in programs, such as microfinance, that create jobs, generate income and tap into the country's most underutilised resource: its women.

Today's successful female clients belong to families with more savings and capability to invest in the education of the next generation, in whose hands the future success of Afghanistan lies.

prevent Afghans, particularly women and those in rural and remote areas, from having access to micro financial services. Such barriers, at times, come in the form of misperceptions of microfinance being un-Islamic, propagated by religious fundamentalists.

- Support projects and programs - and in a coordinated manner with other members of the donor community - that can lead to greater opportunities for Afghan women's participation in the economy, beyond the traditional sewing, embroidery, crafts making and carpet weaving.
- Such support to alternative economic activities for women must include: continuing business development training; vocational education on non-traditional, culturally accepted activities that would help them break out of the traditional mould; and direct links between women entrepreneurs and market supply chains, to give them a real chance at competition and sustainability.

Victoria Schofield is an author. Her book *The Soviet Invasion of Afghanistan in 1979* provided the inspiration for another book, *Every Rock, Every Hill: The Plain Tale of the North-West Frontier and Afghanistan*, which she revised as *Afghan Frontier: Feuding and*

*Fighting in Central Asia* and then as *Afghan Frontier: At the Crossroads of Conflict*.

*I remember you... when you have no choice, no voice, no rights, no existence  
when you have no laughs, no joy, no freedom, no resistance - your pain,  
your agony, your silence, your loneliness, your anger,  
your frustration, your cries, your unhappiness...*

*I remember you . . . when you gain your rights, reach your goals and hope(s)  
but the path is hard, full of obstacles, you must learn how to cope -  
to cope while struggling for your ultimate goal - a reborn woman,  
free, independent and whole.*

When attempting to verbalise the hardships faced by Afghan women, the poem written by peace activist, Dr Zieba Shorish-Shamley, conveys better than prose, their suffering. As history tells us, since time immemorial the Afghan people have fought over *zan, zar,* and *zameen*; women, gold and land. Especially in rural areas, women in Afghanistan have been regarded as little more than a man's property – an acquisition along with cattle and other worldly goods. For centuries, the pattern of women's lives has been the same; there has never been a period in history when life has been easy.

While the men were at war, fighting their tribal neighbours or foreign intruders for survival, custom dictated that the women tended to the home; they prepared the food, often working in the fields, fetched the water, and kept the house clean.

This is what was both expected and demanded of them in days gone by and also today. As wives, with no knowledge of or help with birth control, they have also had to deal with frequent pregnancies and miscarriages often bearing as many as 12 children in their lifetime. Invariably a mother would have to bury her child, dead at birth or before the age of 5 through malnutrition or illness. Or she might herself die in childbirth. If she survives, she is likely to have to bury several sons, martyrs of the holy war which has been raging for thirty years since the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in 1979.

In recent memory, the five year Taliban regime, set back centuries women's ability to claim greater freedoms. Girls schools were closed (except the religious schools - *madrassas* - for girls under eight) and so, in 2009, it comes as no surprise that only 13 percent of Afghan women are recorded as being literate.

The wearing of the *burqah* - the all enveloping garment from which women can only peer out on the world through a latticed peephole - was

strictly enforced, with penalties for transgressions. Women were forbidden to work; they could not leave their homes without a male member of the family accompanying them. Women teachers were forbidden to teach and women doctors could no longer practise. As a result, only the more fortunate women with ailments were able to consult a doctor via the intermediary of their husbands. The alternative - going to Pakistan for medical assistance - was generally prohibitive because of the cost.

Today - nearly eight years after the fall of the Taliban regime - prospects should be brighter. Women have been given 'equal rights and duties before the law' under the new constitution. Girls schools have been re-opened. The *burqah* is still worn but penalties for not doing so are no longer enforced.

However, life is still tough. Only the privileged few have the chance of completing high school education. Even today, school can stop abruptly when puberty approaches and there is the prospect of a marriage dowry being obtained. The majority of Afghan women are still forced into marriages against their will. They are often subjected to physical and sexual violence. As noted by the 2009 UN report, 'Silence is violence', 'Violence against women is widespread and deeply-rooted as well as acute. The violence which scars the lives

of a huge proportion of Afghan women and girls is rooted in Afghan culture, customs, attitudes, and practices.'

To help young girls and boys assert their rights, Afghan Aid, a charity with a longstanding presence in Afghanistan, has set up an Afghan Aid Child Peer Group. One small victory was when – through peer pressure, a group of friends succeeded in preventing 14 year old Maida Gul from Ghor province from having to leave school to be married to a 35 year old man. But for the more fortunate few who may be spared a life of hardship, thousands of others have to submit to what custom demands.

Women's life expectancy is still only between the ages of 40 and 50.

There are 1.5 million widows who had had to resort to begging on the streets because they no longer have husbands to provide for them and their families. Progress for women is an elusive concept, like the mirage on the horizon. Traditions cannot be broken down overnight. Yet there is a new awareness amongst young girls, who want more out of their lives than the hardships endured by their mothers and grandmothers. Enabling them to fulfill their dreams is one of the challenges which faces concerned well wishers of Afghanistan today.

### Recommendations

- Education for women remains a priority, starting with health and hygiene including family planning;
- Provision of improved health facilities, doctors, nurses and teachers.
- Improved understanding by well-wishers about what is possible - there is a tendency sometimes to expect progress to be too rapid which can be counterproductive;



*A mother and son in Helmand where work on the poppy harvest creates many 'accidental' opium addicts.  
Picture: Anastasia Taylor-Lind.*

Richard Fyjis-Walker is a former diplomat who entered Britain's Foreign Office after Army service in India and the Netherlands and two years work for the Anglo-American Corporation of South Africa. He served as British Ambassador to Sudan and

Pakistan and in other posts in Ankara, Paris, Cairo, Washington and New York. On his retirement he chaired the Commonwealth Institute.

**Anyone intending to get involved in Afghan affairs - whether governmental or social - needs to have done three things:**

- **Read and digested Afghan history and anthropology - something none of our political parties seem ever to do!**
- **Considered the implications of the international environment surrounding Afghanistan**
- **Realised that visible foreign intervention, particularly by foreign governments or forces, is almost totally repugnant to the vast majority of Afghan men. Of this - beware danger. Be very, very careful.**

History is extremely important to Afghans - as it is to any society largely dependent on oral communication and dedicated to blood feuds going back many generations.

The history of those rulers seen to be puppets of foreign powers - e.g. Amir Shah Shuja who ended up in 1816 as an exiled British pensioner; Soviet protege Najibulla hanged from a lamppost in 1996 or moderniser King Amanullah, ousted violently in 1929, even after achieving Afghan independence, by anti-reformist and anti-women's rights elements - is extremely well known to the Taliban who are trying to re-live past Afghan glories, and to President Karzai who is trying to avoid them.

It explains why Karzai and his warlord associates are so hostile to proper social and political development and why Karzai signed off legislation virtually legally enslaving women in the 21st century!

The social and economic structures (i.e. employment of the women and children in the house and in the fields or even in the towns ) sanctioned by religion and operated by the men, notably the "elders", are extremely resilient - as much so as the Taliban are militarily, with their own institutions and customs.

The "rule" of central government has always been very tenuous outside Kabul and some Provincial cities. No change can develop without the acquiescence of the extremely conservative and dominant men.

The Pashtu, and Kharzai is one, have a particularly rigorous (and restrictive of women) code of conduct - the Pashtunwali.



*The burqa - described by Malalai Joya as 'a shroud for the living'.  
Picture: Tom Stoddart*

The United Nations and Saudi Arabia are the two main international factors affecting Afghan attitudes.

Saudi Arabia's export to Afghanistan of their own extreme Salafi and Wahabist version of Islam spread through the huge financing and provision of schools, mullahs and recruits - Saudi and non Saudi (e.g. Chechens, Pakistanis, Iraqis etc.), for the Taliban are enormously harmful for the development of a moderate, developed and western friendly Afghanistan. Tackling this has to be a priority and can probably only be done at governmental level.

United Nation's pressure was the major reason for Karzai rescinding his women's legislation and demonstrates that Afghan leadership may not wish to become an international pariah. Bringing all but the most fanatical Taliban in to this consensus will be very difficult but it must be attempted by political, and certainly not military means if women's rights are ever to be advanced.

It follows that the scope for any British government support for women's rights in Afghanistan is circumscribed, and any visible support kept in as low a profile as possible. It has to be "internationalised" and Afghanised. Work has to start with supporting progress towards a political settlement bringing in the most ardent anti feminists (i.e. the Taliban!) into the fold. Saudi Arabia has to be persuaded to cease supporting extremists in Afghanistan.

If there are individual Ministries or Ministers in the Afghan Government who might try to improve women's activities they should be encouraged, but mostly via the UN and assistance has to be Afghanised. In other words money has to go through Afghan hands (not a popular idea with western governments I know) with as few western fingerprints on it as possible.

If there are Afghan women's working in Afghanistan they should be supported whatever they are doing - but again "internationalised" and "Afghanised".

External funding should be readily and generously available - still disguised - for any Afghan women who can get out to study at schools and universities, take professional courses and training, attend conferences etc.

Help can at best be only incremental and a very long time scale without obvious plaudits for our generosity and without posturing about the sanctity of universal women's rights in Afghanistan has to be expected.

## Recommendations

- Work for a political settlement in Afghanistan involving all tendencies
- Work to reduce external extremist influences
- Work to soften Afghan male attitudes
- Internationalise and Afghanise any direct assistance to Afghan women struggling for their rights

Maliha Kabir works for Ashram International which has supported Afghan people since 2000. Currently ASHRAM is focusing on empowerment of women through income generation programme. They trained ten girls in traditional carpet weaving last year and now they are in the process of setting up a carpet weaving business, wholly owned by the ten girls. [www.ashraminternational.org](http://www.ashraminternational.org)

There has been improvement in Afghan women's living conditions since the Taliban collapsed in Afghanistan, but securing a normal life in Afghanistan is still a long way off. Afghan women still face conflict at home due to a lack of basic needs and they do not participate in the economic sphere. There is a lack of security outside the home and they are not confident to enter public life.

The UK Government is taking part in fighting for the rights of Afghan women in Afghanistan, which is much appreciated by Afghan women. Afghan women need more time to be able to benefit from their rights, for which the UK Government fights. The majority of Afghan women are not educated enough to know how to use their rights sensibly. They may use their rights in a more damaging way. It will create more violence gender wise. It is also provoking a bitter taste within Afghan society for the UK support policy.

It is a long way for The Afghan Government to reach the stage of being able to practice its law on its people. The government is powerless and poor.

We should involve the parents in the school too, in order for them to become familiar with the school environment. The same time introducing an awareness programme for a better way of living, like a health care programme. This should include the importance of daily nutrition for their mind and body, financial management or family planning.

In some parts of the country there is electricity. People are able to watch TV channels which are a great help in order to improve the quality of people's life. There are many TV channels from inside Afghanistan and Afghan TV channels from abroad. There are educational programmes for women.

Women who have TV in their homes are able to benefit from it. But the majority of Afghan women are still living without electricity, and are unable to afford to have TV. They are illiterate – so even if newspapers and magazines are available they cannot read. Therefore, I think at this time TV is the best source of education if they have electricity.

Men should be educated to accept that women are their equals and shown that women's equality will make life easier for them and they should not be threatened by it.

As we know, the Taliban are the Afghan refugees' children from the refugee camps in Pakistan who were trained to fight against Russians in Afghanistan. They do not know a better way of living. If we invest in them, to show them a peaceful way of living, they will not fight with guns. Most of the Taliban are fighting because there are no alternative ways of survival. If they have homes with running water and electricity they will learn to appreciate them and not bomb the electricity power station.

As women, we have been discriminated through the centuries whether we are Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or any other ethnic group. We know that we are biologically different, and have different capabilities to males.

Afghan society is always viewed as one in which women are downtrodden; while this is true, we must also consider another viewpoint.

***In Afghan society, the root of inequality is created by women themselves.***

Girls are brought up to expect that after they leave their fathers' home, their husbands' will look after them and take all financial responsibilities, and any other related work outside their homes. They are not involved in community activities.

As a family is the foundation of a society we should invest in women who are responsible for bringing up their children.

Afghan women need education in creating equality between her family members (sons and daughters), at home. Gender equality will come when women learn to become responsible for their own life. Therefore education of Afghan women is a must.

Again most of the Afghan people living in the UK are suffering from a variety of mental illness issues - as a result of the war in Afghanistan and of being refugees. Most Afghans find it difficult to integrate and gather solely amongst themselves.

Also the generation gap between parents brought up in Afghanistan and their children brought up in the UK is

an issue. The parents are fearful of the 'over-freedom' in the UK schools and they are fearful of losing control of their children, and so hesitate to mix with the rest of British society.

Other issues include employment and lack of skills, unfamiliarity with UK immigration and social security systems, housing, health service issues and language barriers.

## Recommendations

- To take slower routes to practice gender equality in Afghanistan not by calling for more war.
- Help women to help themselves - Invest in people at a local level considering their values. Create jobs and vocational training opportunities using successful models which helped other countries from around the world.
- Create more schools for girls (and boys) - Some Afghan families from the villages will hesitate to let their children, especially daughters, go to school. This can be because the school is not near their home and there are no transport facilities or because illiterate parents are fearful of the strange world of school and do not appreciate the importance of educating their children.
- Internationalise and Afghanise any direct assistance to Afghan women struggling for their rights.
- To educate the UK Afghan women to understand women's right and participate in education of Afghan women in Afghanistan.



*Shafiqqa, Samiya and Halima work for TZA (Tolo-e Zanan Afghanistan), a partner organisation of SESA (Sustainable Energy Supply Afghanistan). The solar panels produced in their Kabul workshop are affordable and invaluable in a city where power cuts are commonplace.*

Afghan society is, at its core, an essentially rural one in which tribal and Islamic values underpin highly conservative perspectives. Defence of the honour of women is seen to justify significant restrictions on their ability to engage with society outside the confines of the family structure.

It is the norm for girls to marry in their early to mid-teens, normally through an arranged marriage and often to a cousin, and they can expect to give birth at relatively frequent intervals. The risks of dying in childbirth are among the highest in the world and a relatively high proportion of children will not reach their first birthday.

The need for health care inevitably dominates among other potential needs and this is being addressed through the Basic Package of Health Care and other programmes. As a result, maternal and child mortality rates are already reducing - yet the scope to do more through increased investment is considerable.

The freedom to seek health-care, in the face of restrictions on female mobility, is regrettably dependent on the willingness of fathers, husbands, brothers and mothers-in-law to take the health care needs of their female relatives seriously. This requires long-term societal change.

The provision of education for girls is a more complex issue. For a high proportion of families, the education of their daughters is not a priority. It is seen to be enough that they are instructed, by other women in the village, on the basic tenets of Islam so that they can pass these on to the next generation. In fact, education, particularly if it is provided by Western agencies, represents a threat to the continuation of adherence to Islamic and societal values.

Yet many girls have lived in exile - for the most part in Pakistan or Iran - and have had the opportunity to be educated, at least, at the primary level.

As a consequence, there is considerable interest in taking this education further so as to engage in the professional workforce.

Further complexity is created by the fact that leadership of the resistance to the military interventions by the Soviet

Union and the US has come to be assumed by radical Islamic and that these have used a defence of the honour of women as a key element of their call for jihad. As a result, the provision of education for girls, by a government which is regarded as having a close association with the West, is presented as being a means whereby Western and, possibly, Christian values can be imparted to Afghan society.

Thus, while it is important for investment in education to not only continue but also to increase, policy must be determined in close consultation with the Afghan Government and with Afghan civil society in order to minimise the risk of a backlash, whether from society at large or from radical Islamic such as the former Mujahedin or the Taliban. The active targeting of schools by the Taliban, with schools being burned and teachers killed, is one manifestation of such a backlash.

Careful regard must also be had to the fact that the political environment in Afghanistan is becoming progressively more conservative.

The creation of the Afghan parliament in September 2005 has provided a platform for the former Mujahedin parties to call for restrictions on the media and to keep a close eye on possible threats to Islamic values. Women who are active in politics are often regarded as liberal and have to take particular care of their personal security.

Many have received death threats. Similarly, women who seek to work outside the home can come under significant pressure, both from within their families and from the Mujahedin or the Taliban, as can those who choose to challenge the decisions of their families with regard to marriage. The risk of violence is, therefore, an ever present one.

It is nonetheless essential to recognise that the way forward, in seeking to improve female access to health care, education, employment and involvement in the political sphere, is through women's civil society.

To advocate for an improvement in the situation of women on the basis of

## Recommendations

- That investment in health care and education for women and girls should be based on a long term commitment, with resources gradually increasing in response to growing capacity within the Afghan government.
- That policy with regard to improving female access to health care, education, employment and involvement in the political sphere should be guided through continuing dialogue with the Afghan government and women's civil society.

Western values is to risk setting them back further.

Above all, the centrality of Islam to the positions taken by women in Afghanistan must be fully taken on board.

Peter Marsden

- That the importance of Afghan women's civil society, as a vehicle for improving the situation of women and girls in a manner which is sensitive to both societal values and the political environment, should be recognised through the provision of generous financial support.



*Midwife Victoria Parsa at Kabul's Cure Hospital cradles two of the quads born to a young mother who travelled miles to give birth.*

*Picture: Anastasia Taylor-Lind*

The Afghan Women's Writing Project began as an idea during novelist Masha Hamilton's last trip to Afghanistan in November 2008. Her interest in Afghanistan was sparked in the late 1990s during the Taliban period, when she understood it was one of the

worst places in the world to be a woman. Masha first visited the country in 2004, and was awed and inspired by the resolute courage of the women she met. When she returned, she saw doors were closing and life was again becoming more difficult, especially for women. She began to fear we could lose access to the voices of Afghan women if we didn't act soon. The Afghan Women's Writing Project is aimed at allowing Afghan women to have a direct voice in the world, not filtered through male relatives or members of the media. Many of these Afghan women have to make extreme efforts to gain computer access in order to submit their writings, in English, to the project. Names are changed, but the stories are all true. "Henna" (below) is one of them. <http://awwproject.wordpress.com/>



### ***"Henna" By 'Meena' - 6th October, 2009***

The spicy scent of henna used to bring back memories of Eid, weddings, parties and all the happy occasions. Now, the only thing henna's smell brings me is the image of my mother and me crouched in the far corner of the kitchen, crying. The smell of henna brings back anger and sorrow, a sense of helplessness and weakness.

Like many Kabul winter days, it was cold, dry and gray. The schools were off for the winter. My eldest aunt was visiting from Iran. My two younger sisters were sitting at the end of the room drawing, a habit they had adopted to avoid having to worry about my parents' problems.

Funny, whenever we had such problems they would always draw cartoons, animals, and dolls. But they would also often draw homes, safe and warm. The living room was large with tan walls that had been darkened from the smoke of the stove. The curtains, as usual, were closed so no man from outside could see us. My parents and aunt were in the men's guest room. My mother had asked us not to come. And I knew something was wrong again.

I was sitting on the big red mattress. I got up. I could no longer take the silence or the suspense.

I walked towards the door when I heard my sister calling after me "Do not go, remember what Mother jaan said."

I answered without looking, "I am going to the kitchen only, don't worry." I went downstairs, walking slowly and looking at the black marble of the stairs as if I were reading something in the blackness. As I got closer to the hall, the smell of Shorwa-e-Tarkari, an Afghan dish made of meat with lots of vegetables, got stronger and reminded me of my mother feeding me with her soft, warm hands when I refused to eat the vegetables.

When I got to the small hall, I sat on the stairs and looked up, trying to find Allah to ask Him why? I could not find Him. Even He had left me alone. I got up and walked towards the small room at the end of the yard, often used as the men's guest room.

My fear of what I might hear made me walk slowly but the thought of my mother being there defenseless made me walk fast while folding my bare arms tightly. The room was much lower than the yard; I walked down the three stairs through a narrow, dark corridor.

As I went towards the room, my father's voice got louder. He said to my aunt, "You don't know this slut; she is a slut, a whore. I never wanted to get married anyway, and you all forced me to and look at this mess now."

My father had turned on my mother many times before, when he would leave the house and we would not see him for a month or two. Usually his sisters would come and they would talk. After they talked, our lives would get back to normal. But my siblings and I never knew what was said in those meetings. Until now. I was shocked as I heard my father using those words. I did not know what to feel, but I wanted to somehow undo it, somehow make the words go back.

I heard my mother's voice crying and saying "Akbar, What I have done to you that you are making me go through all this? I have to stay in this marriage because of my children, because of my father's honor." She continued, "You are calling me a slut just because a corner of the stupid curtain was open and you think I did it in purpose so the men could see me."

"Don't you dare talk to me that way," said my father. "I know you did it on purpose and you can go to your father's house anytime you wish and live there."

I heard my mother crying. I brought my hands to my face. I could smell the henna in the palms of my hands. It smelled so different, so strange. It smelled like a happiness I was not granted. I ran to the kitchen.

I sat in the corner, folding my legs, with my face buried in my hands. The smell of henna took me back to the days when my mother, sitting on the floor just out of shower, her wet hair hanging down, would paint henna in my little palms. She looked so focused, frowning with her forehead and yet she looked so innocent you would want to protect her from everything, from life itself.

I opened my eyes looked around the kitchen, remembered the times when I came back from school and found my mother standing in the kitchen with her back to me. I would often run to her and hug her from the back. She did use perfume, but the smell of perfume was nothing compared to her own smell. She smelled like a mother, warm and kind. She would always tell me: "Now stop bothering me; go and change. I will fix you some lunch."

I was still sitting in the kitchen when my mother entered. She wore a black scarf draped on her head. Her face looked as if her soul was not present. Her eyes were a little red from crying. I stood up, turned and cleaned my tears, pretending I had heard nothing. I said, "I will go get some logs," avoiding her face.

When I came back with the logs, I found her sitting on the floor of the kitchen with her face in her hands, sobbing. I put down the logs and hurried towards her. I put my arms around her and held her. We both were crying uncontrollably while hugging each other and the smell of henna was all in the air. We did not exchange a word, but the silence said it all.

Whenever I smell henna, it takes me back to the winter of 2002, to that same corner of the kitchen where my mother and I were sitting and crying, holding each other to protect each other from the harsh winds of life.

**'Meena'**

Chris Beales is Chief Executive of Afghan Training Foundation. Afghan Action offers young people living in Kabul and the surrounding areas a unique opportunity to be trained and to develop their skills so that they can become carpet weavers and also to learn how to read and write. Not only does this offer them a real chance to make something of their lives, it makes a real difference to their families, by helping bring in essential income. The scheme also helps the local community by creating sustainable employment and educated young people. [www.afghanaction.com](http://www.afghanaction.com)

Just imagine - a young woman desperate for education but scared to leave her home. How can she ever access the information she needs and the learning she is so anxious to acquire? Here's an answer - well, maybe. Bring the classroom via the internet to her home, where her basic laptop (internet-savvy but not much more) enables her to access her folders and files on her desktop, which is held remotely, "virtually". Not a simple solution, because at the moment satellite access to the internet is required. But with dongles and mobile phones now providing internet for us in the UK, that could be pertinent for Afghanistan also.

Virtualisation is the next big step in IT development. And the Afghan Training Foundation, a small but dynamic British charity, is working with two innovative and generous IT companies to make it happen. Tribune Business Systems, a City of London IT company working mainly with schools, and Neda Holding, Afghanistan's largest internet provider, are working hard to make the latest VDI technology available to schools in Kabul and, in time, across Afghanistan.

***The Afghan Training Foundation has been working in Afghanistan for nearly four years. The Foundation owns a trading company, Afghan Action, which opened a small carpet factory and training school in Karte Se, Kabul in September 2005 with startup funding from the British Government.***

By last August, we had trained 330 young men and women aged between 14 and 25 (including some disabled people) and were employing over 170 people - and just completing an order for 300m<sup>2</sup> of rugs and runners for Habitat.

We had also made some carpets for John Lewis and a beautiful carpet for The Rug Company.

In the sharp economic downturn which followed, we were forced, very reluctantly, to make cuts to our workforce but, with hard work and great care, we have not only survived but are rebuilding and currently have 50 people on site in Karte Se.

Over the past three years, we have held nearly 100 sales and events across the

UK, in churches and cathedrals, businesses, people's homes and the Houses of Parliament. We have growing links with some large companies in Afghanistan who will help open doors to others. Armor Group held a sale recently in its Kabul premises and over 40 square metres of carpet was sold. They are offering more sales opportunities and also sponsoring 20 trainees.

Ashram International, an exciting charitable trust with a real commitment to help women in Afghanistan, sponsored 10 young women last year through training and education with Afghan Action. Now we're exploring ways of enabling them to form a business - and seeking to raise £20,000 towards this.

One of these young women, 16 year old Zakia, is one of a family of 11. She was born in Ghazni Province. During the Taliban regime her family was in Kabul and her brother was killed by the Taliban. Her father was so ill he died. Her second brother, a mechanic, was the family's sole breadwinner and Zakia decided to help solve the family's economic problems by training as a weaver with us.

Also 16, Lila, one of a family of five, was born in Iran. Her father was killed by the Taliban during the war. After the collapse of the Taliban regime, the family came back to Afghanistan. Her oldest brother, a carpenter, is 19 and responsible for feeding his family. Lila wanted to learn to weave and came to Afghan Action.

We hope they will become leading business women in the new Afghanistan. They're keen and committed. And as 60% of Afghanistan's 25 million population is under 25, it is vital that young adults - especially women - are encouraged to find good jobs, develop honest businesses and access fair international markets. In fact, Afghan women have a vital role to play in growing thriving small and medium-sized enterprises, where at present there is a huge gap.

We have two British Council schools exchange programmes (Harpenden/Mazar and Hammersmith/Kabul) and in May 2009 had a group of school principals from Mazar visiting Harpenden. The Department for International Development has granted us a mini grant to work in development education with schools in East Yorkshire and, provisionally, a larger grant for raising awareness about Afghanistan across the UK among faith groups, businesses and the media.

We have a London programme working with Afghan diaspora groups - some

fascinating work has been done with Afghan women and their experience of living in a strange land with limited language skills and other important issues - and we have recently been granted a further two years' funding for this work.

We have links at the highest levels in the British and Afghan Governments, with international businesses, small companies, NGOs and the military - and over 1,500 people on our database here in the UK.

We know from our experience, and from what Afghan people repeatedly tell us both in the UK and Afghanistan, that the real hope for this beleaguered country and its suffering people lies not only in military solutions or more humanitarian aid - but in good jobs, honest businesses and fair access to international markets.

***What can be done to make the vital difference? Buy a carpet - sponsor a trainee - make a donation - change a life - and secure a future for us all.***

## Recommendations

- Don't stifle enterprise. Make good jobs, honest businesses and access to fair international markets the touchstone for a dynamic Afghanistan. And listen to the people who are committed to doing this.
- Create a new Business and Enterprise Investment Fund for small and medium sized enterprises, to encourage and enable investment in Afghanistan - not yet more advisory structures, investment climate facilities and bureaucratic systems.. but direct, purposeful financial assistance to encourage investors to get in and create jobs, businesses and markets.
- Back the true risk takers and entrepreneurs and create a climate of can-do - and must-do! That means stimulating the SME sector and, in particular, encouraging women and young people to start businesses.

Ceri Hayes was Head of Policy & Advocacy, WOMANKIND Worldwide. WOMANKIND Worldwide is an international women's rights and development charity that works in partnership with women around the world to eliminate violence against women and increase women's civil and political participation. WOMANKIND has produced a series of reports examining progress on women's rights in Afghanistan since 2001. The reports assess different areas of women's rights and links these to existing commitments and legal obligations on the part of the Afghan government and the international community - they are a useful tool for anyone who wishes to understand or explain the shortfalls on promises made for Afghanistan's reconstruction in relation to women's human rights. Copies of the reports can be accessed at <http://www.womankind.org.uk/takingstockdownloads.html>  
Ceri is now an independent gender and human rights consultant.

*"This is the paradox of women in Afghanistan...they now have a say and a position under the country's constitution, but they have to work in an atmosphere of fear and intimidation."*

Soutik Biswa

WOMANKIND Worldwide has been working on women's issues in Afghanistan since 2003 - we believe the need to address women's human rights and involve women in every stage of the reconstruction process was, and remains, urgent.

The foundations, key to any successful state-building, have been laid; new; institutions mandated to protect women's human rights; the ratification of the UN Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; a constitution that enshrines the equal rights of Afghan women and men; electoral quotas that ensure a certain number of women participate in parliament - 27% of Afghan MPs are now women; and the development of a National Action Plan for Women endorsed by the Afghan government and its donors.

But laws and commitments on paper are, quite simply, not enough.

Afghanistan is still one of the most dangerous countries in the world to be a woman. It has one of the highest rates of maternal mortality and domestic violence. It is a country where women set themselves on fire to escape brutality, where girls as young as eight are married to elderly men and where 60% of marriages are forced.

Women and girls still have minimal protection from violence and, international aid frequently fails to address their most urgent needs in the areas of judicial reform, health, employment and education.

Relevant laws need to be enforced and action plans need to be implemented urgently. This requires concerted efforts by the Afghan government and its partners, in this case the UK

Government, to meet national and international commitments on women's rights.

In the run-up to the general election our engagement in Afghanistan is certain to be debated at length. WOMANKIND believes that Afghan women's rights must be central to this discussion and that the voice of Afghan women must be heard.

Successfully ending discrimination against women in Afghanistan is dependent on the work of local and national women's , including WOMANKIND's partner the Afghan Women's Resource Centre which provide basic services such as healthcare and education that are accessible to women where there are none, and raise awareness of human rights issues, tackling violence, peace-building and changing discriminatory attitudes.



Summary execution - a woman is shot by Taliban gunmen.  
Picture: RAWA.

These are often the only place women can go for education or to escape violence, forced marriage and other threats.

They also speak out, often at considerable risk to themselves, against retrograde laws and policies - for example, in 2006 they helped quash the return of the notorious Department for the Prevention of Vice and the Promotion of Virtue, which would have suppressed them further.

More recently, they succeeded in getting President Karzai to remove provisions from a Shia Family Law that essentially legalised marital rape.

## Recommendations

- Support the Afghan Government to address women's security and to tackle violence against women

Insecurity continues to be the number one concern for the Afghan women we talk to. Insecurity and violence, whether within or outside the home, pervade every aspect of life, affecting their participation in the economy, in politics, in cultural life and their access to education, healthcare and government services.

The Afghan Army and the NATO-led ISAF must develop specific strategies to protect women from sexual violence and to enable them to gain access to water, healthcare and markets - and should create the conditions necessary to participate safely in public and political life. This requires:

- *recognising the key role of community and women's and consulting with them about reconstruction, peace-building and development initiatives, and assisting women at risk of abuse of violence*
- *supporting survivors of violence to seek justice through the legal system and ensuring that perpetrators are brought to justice*
- *supporting the Ministry of Women's Affairs or experienced women's to open women's shelters across Afghanistan that also provide livelihood opportunities*

Many donors are beginning to reduce funding to programmes for women or scale back operations in favour of direct bilateral assistance. This blocks both the delivery of long-term programmes and their organisational sustainability.

***Women's organisations in Afghanistan must continue to have access to long-term resources - both financial and technical - to ensure their continued growth, development and capacity to provide services where no others exist.***

- *supporting programmes working with religious and traditional leaders to condemn and prevent violence against women.*

- Support the Afghan Government to increase women's access to decision-making at all levels.

Outside the large cities, women are noticeably absent from public life. Even women who secure decision-making positions at local or national level, are forced to censor statements on women's rights issues. There is inadequate protection to enable them to exercise their right to participate freely in the decision-making process.

- The UK Government must support the Afghan government to ensure equal numbers of women and men on Community Development Councils.

Women must also be able to provide expertise and exercise leadership during national development strategy discussions, international donor conferences, and at the consultations on peace-building and transitional justice, from which they have traditionally been excluded.

Fatima Ayub is an advocacy officer with the Open Society Institute in London. Active in more than 60 countries, OSI works to build vibrant and tolerant democracies whose governments are accountable to their citizens. In Afghanistan, OSI works to support good governance and civic participation, and promotes civil and political rights. OSI opened its Kabul office in 2008.

Civilian casualties and detention are among the most contentious and divisive issues for Afghan communities, undermining support for the Afghan government and international forces. The UK government should closely review the policies and conduct of UK troops in an effort to reduce civilian casualties and to instil greater accountability and transparency into the detention system in Afghanistan. Addressing these two issues can make an immediate difference in improving communities' quality of life, their perceptions of security and stability in Afghanistan, and their willingness to engage with and trust the Afghan government and international forces.

In the first five months of 2009 alone, 800 Afghans were direct casualties of military activity, and 2008 saw a 40% rise in civilian casualties from the year before. Of any tactic, air strikes continue to inflict the heaviest tolls against civilians.

Air strikes cause heavy damage to homes, community infrastructure and civilian lives.

Women and children suffer disproportionately from the multiple impacts of air strikes.

For many Afghans, a single income supports several families; consequently, even if a single person is killed, the poverty and vulnerability of whole communities deepen. Air strikes also spark a more subtle but equally destructive trend; alienation from, and hostility toward, international forces and the government that the forces are meant to support.

The failure to recognise errors and offer timely apology and compensation to victims and their families further inflames public discontent and anger. Because Afghan casualties have been rising but not been skyrocketing, innocents who are wounded or killed during combat operations receive much less attention from international forces.

Though less fatal, the practice of nocturnal house searches (or night raids, as they have come to be called in Afghanistan) provoke even more distress and resentment against international forces. These raids, conducted in a fashion to maximise shock and disorientation and with excessive force, often lead to wrongful detentions and

the destruction of property.

In many of the rural and poor areas, even the most austere possessions are irreplaceable, and the destruction of homes, livestock and other property can further impoverish dozens of people living in the same home. Worse, raids signify an unforgivable intrusion into a family's private domain. In conservative communities, women rarely leave their homes alone, and the uninvited presence of nameless and sometimes violent foreign male soldiers is incredibly offensive.

As with civilian casualties, conflict-related detentions carry far-reaching effects on communities as a whole - men, women and children. Captures often involve violence against entire families, their property, and their cultural norms and traditions. For all involved, physical and verbal abuse and mental trauma can occur at the point of capture and after.

Poorly qualified interpreters and malicious informants who provide false information to international forces also contribute to wrongful captures. All of these practices sharply erode trust between international forces and the population, and serve to further alienate Afghans from the government that is meant to protect them.

Exactly how many Afghans have been held in the custody of foreign forces is unclear. The American practice of indefinite detention is receiving increasing attention, and occasionally new stories will emerge about detention practices at Bagram Air Force Base.

Much less is known about UK detention policies in Afghanistan. Usually, an individual detained by UK forces is either handed over to Afghan custody. Based on a Memo of Understanding with the Afghan Government from 2006, the UK has the authority to monitor the well-being of that detainee while in Afghan custody. A judicial review process is currently underway to investigate the transfer monitoring arrangements in the light of two detainees who allege that they were subjected to torture or other ill-treatment in Afghan custody after being detained by UK forces.

After capture, UK and other members of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) will either release the detainee or transfer him into the

custody of the Afghan intelligence agency, which has a documented history of torturing prisoners, denying detainees basic judicial guarantees such as access to lawyers and is susceptible to corruption.

The weakness of Afghan law enforcement and judicial institutions and the fact that the UK and other ISAF contributing countries fail to sufficiently document a detainee's wrong-doing upon capture make it difficult for Afghan prosecutors to charge a detainee with a crime. And, if charged, the weak evidence provided by ISAF makes it nearly impossible for the detainee to have a fair trial.

## Recommendations

- Proportionate force is exercised in all situations and that the use of air power is kept to a minimum to preserve both the lives of civilians and soldiers.
- Afghan law enforcement is strengthened to ensure better intelligence gathering methods as a more sustainable and worthwhile alternative to the shock tactics used to gather evidence during night raids.
- Female officers are included in home searches, and searches do not contravene the dignity or customs of the community.
- Timely, public apologies and adequate and regular compensation are provided to families in the event of casualties.
- Ensure that people upon capture are not subject to physical, verbal, or mental abuse; end unnecessary destruction of property; and respect cultural and religious norms.
- Victims of wrongful detentions should be provided with an official apology and adequate and timely compensation for any loss of property or livelihood suffered as a consequence of their detention.
- Improve techniques for gathering, corroborating, analysing, and documenting intelligence and other forms of information so to reduce the number of wrongful detentions and to better support Afghan's prosecutorial system. This should include working more closely with Afghan National Security Forces and continuing to engage in conflict-related Rule of Law reform efforts.



A 12-year-old injured girl in Farah General Hospital. Photograph: RAWA.

Margaret Owen is an international human rights lawyer, with a special focus, as Founder and Director of Widows for Peace through Democracy (WPD), on the particular situation of widows and wives of the missing in conflict and post-conflict scenarios. She is also a founder member of GAPS-UK (Gender Action on Peace and Security) and the UK Bar Human Rights Committee. She is consultant to the UN on Widowhood issues and has written extensively on this neglected gender/human rights issue. [www.widowsforpeace.org](http://www.widowsforpeace.org)

### Widows for Peace through Democracy

Kabul is now known as the “Widows’ Capital”. There are no official statistics, (their absence is probably the biggest obstacle to creating proper awareness of this issue), but it is estimated that in Kabul alone there are over 70,000 widows and children struggling to survive in extreme poverty and deprivation. A survey in 2006 reported that 65% of these women saw suicide as the only option to escape from their misery and desolation.

They are of all ages, from the very old, to those who are still children, married before they reached puberty, often to older men who have other wives. The majority are illiterate, having never been to school. Perhaps there are over 2 million widows in the country as a whole; other estimates speak of one in seven women having lost their husbands.

According to a UN report nearly all of the 37,000 street children in Kabul are fatherless. But as yet, widows have not been counted, nor their voices heard, their needs addressed or their crucial roles as sole supporters of fatherless children recognised and supported. They are the most destitute, abandoned and neglected of all Afghan women.

#### ***Today the average age of an Afghan widow is a mere 35.***

There have been so many wars. The Soviet invasion killed thousands of Afghan men and boys; then, under the Taliban, many women not only lost their fathers, husbands, brothers and sons, but also began to suffer the extreme abuse, now so well documented, under the oppressive fundamentalism that regards women generally as an under-class to be controlled by men. In this social environment, where women’s lives are determined by discriminatory interpretations of religious and customary law, widows are regarded as social outcasts.

Prohibited from having any mobility, unable even to leave their homes, unless accompanied by a mahram (close adult male relative) widows and their daughters became incarcerated prisoners in their homes. Furthermore,

customary laws denied (and continue to deny) widows any rights to inheritance, or land and property ownership.

However, while Afghan widows are the poorest of the poor, they have key and crucial roles in reconstruction and the restoration of social stability. They are the sole supporters of not only their own fatherless children, but other orphans and the elderly, the wounded and the sick. On them depend so many young people, at present deprived of education and hope in the future.

The poverty of these widows and their children, if not addressed and relieved, will frustrate all efforts to achieve peace and prevent future conflict.

Many widows managed to flee the Taliban into neighbouring Pakistan and Iran, and in the refugee camps run by RAWA (the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan) were able to access literacy classes and training in income-generating activities. Women teachers also fled their country and thus, in some of the camps, quite astonishing educational opportunities opened for Afghan women and girls, not possible in their homeland at that time.

But the widows always feared the future: “Who will provide for us when we return? Who will repair or rebuild our houses? Who will pay for our children to go to school? Who will protect us and feed us?”

When these widows returned to their villages, towns and cities their fears were realised. There was no one to protect or support them.

On the contrary they became the most vulnerable to diverse forms of exploitation - economic and sexual - from members of their husband's family and from the community. Domestic violence, sexual abuse and rape, forced remarriage to a husband's brother or cousin make widows' lives insufferable. Many widows have sought further refuge and a solution to their problems by coming to the cities hoping to find paid employment, or at least shelter and food in return for it.

The invasion and occupation of Afghanistan – intended, the US asserted, to “liberate Afghan women”, and the continuing violence and lawlessness has only increased the numbers of widows and fatherless children. Across the country women without male protectors, such as widows, are the most vulnerable to abductions (for ransom, and for sex), to trafficking, and to forced prostitution.

On the streets of Kabul the widows are begging. But as Gul, a widow who fled her brother-in law's sexual abuse in a village 30 miles from Kabul, recounted “I go out on the streets from dawn to dusk. I am lucky if I make 50 afghanis (80p) and that will only buy 2 pieces of bread to feed my 3 children.”

There are some excellent projects for widows in Kabul. Care has trained many hundreds of widows to set up laundry, needlework and food preparation businesses - but even their project HAWA, poorly funded by the international community, cannot possible

accommodate all the thousands of widows surviving in perilous circumstances and in great need.

There are no pensions for widows. The Afghanistan Ministry for Women, while it would like to address the many complex issues of widowhood and gather statistics on their numbers, ages, support systems, needs, coping strategies, life-styles, is unable to do as it is so poorly funded.

“We are headless, homeless and jobless and have no hole to hide in,” wrote one educated widow trying to house, feed, and educate her 5 children.

What are the coping strategies of this multitude of widows? Withdrawal of children from school; sending children on the streets to beg; prostitution; drug smuggling; and marrying off or selling the girl children (for as little as \$10) to men seeking servants or new young wives. Recently, we at WPD started to hear more worrying stories: Of widows imprisoned for having fled forced marriages; and of suicide by self-immolation. Widowhood is one of the most neglected of all gender and human rights issues. It is time for the UK government, through DfID and the FCO, to assist the Karzai government to focus on this issue and address it with appropriate policies.

## Recommendations

- Support all efforts to fill gap in data on Afghan widowhood;
- Support Afghan widows to “band together” to form their own associations so as to have their voices heard, and gather information via Mapping and Profiling, in compliance with UN SCR 1325.
- Ensure the widowhood issues are mainstreamed in constitution and law reform, strategies to achieve MDGs, and implement CEDAW and Beijing Platform;
- Support Afghan Ministry of Women to address Widowhood Issues.

Samira Hamidi is the Gender Mainstreaming Coordinator with Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan, a United Nations Development Program in the Ministry of Interior. She has been working with UNDP/LOTFA since November 2006 on gender mainstreaming in the security sector and finding better opportunities and capacity-building for Afghan policewomen.

### UNDP- LOTFA

The Afghan National Police (ANP), Ministry of Interior (MOI) is deficient in both quality and quantity of policewomen. In 2006 of 63,000 police being paid salaries, only 180 were women. Most of these women in the police were involved in servicing tasks such as making tea, doing secretarial jobs. Some were assigned to search female passengers and their luggage at Afghanistan's airports. These women were kept away from active policing duties.

In June 2009, the total number of police was over 83,000 – with just 675 women. The condition of policewomen is almost still the same as of now. In spite of lots of efforts from the international community and stakeholders, by establishment of a gender mainstreaming unit in MOI, the women in the ANP do not receive equal rights or perform equal duties as policemen.

Afghanistan's conservative culture, which generally requires the strict segregation of men and women, makes it unacceptable for the male police to search, interrogate or deal with women in any direct manner.

The ANP believes that the lack of policewomen has led to an increased number of women drug traffickers as well as insurgents in the recent times. In the view of these developments, the need to have a substantial number of policewomen has become all the more urgent.

Another argument for having police women is that female complainants who interact with policemen not only have to face the difficulty in accessing the police but also deal with the family/social disapproval that follows interaction with men who are not relatives.

As things stand, there is a wide-scale reluctance to seek assistance or protection or to file a criminal case. Most women in Afghanistan would rather not go to the police, even if they have access, due to family and social disapproval and the image of the police. Their reluctance is likely to be much higher if they have to visit all male police establishments. The reluctance is intensified if the problems are related to sexual violence within or outside the home, domestic violence including forced marriage.

The instances of women approaching the police for protection and getting caught in further problems increases the distrust.

Lack of police women has also caused a great range of gender discrimination within the ANP. Due to the nature of the ANP as a male dominated society, women are often not welcomed in the organisation.

Those working within MOI with work experience of 20-30 years often complain about their male counterparts' negative behavior towards them. The complaints are usually about the belief of policemen that policing is not a profession for women.

The policemen also claim that policewomen are not capable of undertaking senior and technical positions within the ANP and their training is neglected.

It is mostly policemen who enjoy the training and capacity building program opportunities. Another reason for this is there is no senior level leadership within MOI to look into equal delegation of such chances to both policemen and policewomen.

Research conducted internationally clearly demonstrates that policewomen rely on a style of policing that uses less physical force. They are better at defusing and de-escalating potentially violent confrontations with citizens and less likely to become involved in problems with use of excessive force.

Additionally, policewomen often possess better communication skills than their male counterparts and are better able to facilitate the cooperation and trust required to implement a community policing model.

In a situation of widespread distrust and use of excessive force, recruiting and retaining of good quality policewomen is likely to be an effective means of addressing the problems of excessive force and citizen complaints.

As an additional benefit, female officers often respond more effectively to incidents of violence against women which is hardly ever reported to the police. Increasing the representation of women on the ANP is also likely to address the pervasive problems of sex discrimination and sexual harassment as presence of women in critical number may lead to these issues being raised and redressed with efficiency.

Because women frequently have different life experiences than men, they approach policing with a different perspective. Presence of women in critical numbers on the ANP is likely to influence policies and procedures so that they benefit both male and female police personnel.



*Female guards at Kabul Women's Prison are members of the ANP. Unlike their counterparts in remote provinces they wear smart uniforms and are given real responsibility.  
Picture: Anastasia Taylor-Lind*

## Allyson Arnold

Allyson Arnold was a midwifery trainer and deputy programme manager for the International Medical Corps Training Programme at Rabia Balkhi Women's Hospital in Kabul. Her focus is access to healthcare for women and in particular the high rates of maternal mortality.

Afghan women are particularly vulnerable to poor health care. Their basic human rights, including social, economical and individual freedoms, are often violated resulting in limited access to medical care. There are often problems surrounding mobility, inadequate numbers of female healthcare providers and few centres specialising in women's health. As a result, maternal mortality and morbidity remains a significant problem and the death rate from pregnancy and childbirth is one of the highest in the world.

Afghanistan loses 1600 women per 100,000 births; this equates to one woman dying approximately every 27 minutes. There is an Afghan saying 'When a woman dies the child is sure to die'. It is estimated that if a woman dies during childbirth or shortly after, their newborn has only a one in four chance to live until its first birthday. The issue of maternal mortality is not just affecting women but the next generation of Afghanistan.



Many women die after childbirth from a condition called 'Post Partum Haemorrhage' (PPH). Often PPH can be prevented by having access to a skilled birth attendant who recognises the signs of PPH and is able to act quickly. Training for skilled providers should ensure the skills and knowledge to identify early signs of PPH as well as competency in administering drugs that contract the uterus, thus preventing PPH.

*Women training to be midwives at Helmand's Bost Hospital. Picture: Anastasia Taylor-Lind*

### **\*Amanullah's story:**

*Amanullah's first wife died in childbirth from post partum haemorrhage. His baby died shortly afterwards, as he was not able to provide milk for feeding. Amanullah has limited access to health care services where he lives and it is too expensive to go to the nearest main town for treatment. In the wintertime there are no means of transportation in the mountains. Transportation is a major problem in accessing emergency obstetric care all over Afghanistan.*

When a woman is denied essential health care during her pregnancy and labour, serious complications can occur including obstructed labour, a risk that is increased when the mother is not fully developed. Individual freedoms of women in Afghanistan are often ignored, resulting in many early/forced marriages and thus a high rate of pregnancies that start at an early age.

Obstructed labour can be prevented when women are given access to essential healthcare and a chance for operative delivery if necessary.

**\*Saboor's story:**

Saboor lives with his three children in a remote village in Badakhshan. His wife and mother to his children died in childbirth due to obstructed labour. She was in labour for two days however everyone around said this was normal and she would be fine. Eventually Saboor decided to travel to the local village for medical assistance and returned with a trained birth attendant who discovered that the baby was lying sideways in the womb and would need to be delivered by surgery. The nearest city with operative medical services would take 4 days on horseback to reach. They called the mullah and they all prayed for her; she died two days later with her baby still undelivered.

(\*All names have been changed to protect identity)

**Recommendations**

- A key factor in decreasing the maternal mortality rates in Afghanistan is to make it a priority in the wider public health plan and to ensure that childbearing women have access to essential medical care provided by qualified individuals.
- Education needs to start early and not only will it be helpful to set up more nursing and midwifery schools across the country, it is also vital that girls are educated early on in order to qualify for entry into these programmes.
- Families of childbearing women also need to be educated in the antenatal stage. Given that many Afghan people are illiterate and few own radios, these education programmes would need to be creatively designed. In addition, program activities should be developed to expand community awareness and demand for quality maternal health services.
- Funding for education of midwives and trained birth attendants and consolidation of all training programmes to offer a nationally recognised certified competence based programme, especially in rural provinces.
- Increased access to maternity services, in particular antenatal care in rural areas
- Maternal healthcare to be made a high priority for public health resources and capacity building programmes.



A young mother soothes her sick child in a Helmand clinic.  
Picture: Anastasia Taylor-Lind

I spent a lot of time talking to Afghan men, and trying to understand where they are coming from. I never could quite get my head around it. There is no point in trying to change things if you don't understand the other side's view-point . . . but then, it's equally difficult when you DO!

The first thing that is clear to me is that assertive western women telling muslim men what to do is a big turn-off. It's not quite as bad as for a man.

What I got from the Afghan men was:

- 1.They are a very traditional community who hold customs and our elders in high respect.
- 2.They despise the west with its blatant commercialism, advertising tobacco alcohol, and flaunting of sex.
- 3.Their view is "We live in very dangerous place where our women need protecting from other men, and from dangerous ideas.We therefore need to protect our women.The simplest way to protect our women is to cover them up and lock them up. Women are vulnerable; their role is to have babies and to bring them up safely. Our job as men is to support and protect them.The western idea of gender equality in all things is ludicrous. We perform two completely different functions.

Separation, not division of labour creates a strong team."

***A muslim doctor explained this to me, but I think the men are actually frightened of women, and so repress them for fear of being dominated in return.***

You cannot change things through the women themselves because they are in a very, very vulnerable situation (they may not even be supported by their own mothers and certainly not by their mothers-in-law). Also it is not at all clear whether, once caught in the web, (at perhaps the age of 12) it is too frightening to try to break out. In this sense maybe the women themselves don't want to change things!

That is probably heresy, but it may be true!

Is anything good happening? Well in Helmand almost nothing. The military pressure we are applying there is entrenching people, and my belief is that if I was a 16 year old Afghan boy in Helmand today, I would have a Kalashnikov in my hands, and would be fighting to the death to rid my country of these "foreign devils".

Our current policy is absolute lunacy.

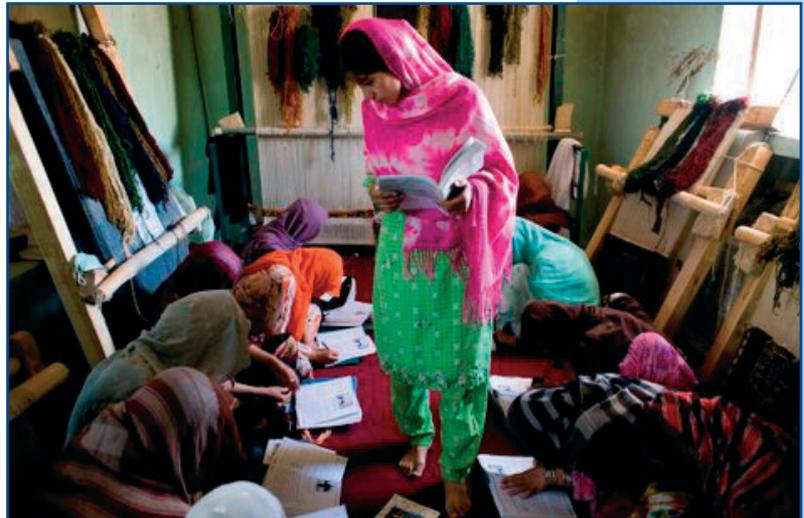
However, there are some rays of light. BBC Pashtu is a phenomenal service. It puts out a twice weekly radio soap (like The Archers) called New Homes, New Lives. This is the everyday tale of a Helmand farming family and has embedded in it nutrition, health and welfare messages.

As I understand it, most Afghan women however constrained in their lives, have access to a radio and listen to this soap avidly.

The men are so stupid, and they are STUPID, that they don't see what is happening under their noses. So this fantastic educational resource is starting a transformation. We showed in some papers in the British Medical Journal some years ago that soap operas are incredibly powerful. Here it is at work.

## Recommendations

- The first thing that you can do is make sure that BBC Pashtu gets all the support it can. It is to me the single most important initiative for helping Afghan women, and yet it is also apparently the best kept secret. I thought the team were passionate, thoughtful and very clever. They also produce school books to go with the programmes. Brilliant.
- Education, education, education. Again we have little or no access to the schools which are of course carefully monitored by the religious fundamentalists. We should be throwing everything we have at schools, and involving the children in public health projects like looking after and testing their local wells, changing habits on defecation in the streets, teaching them about good nutrition before they go from vitamin deficiency to Western obesity, explaining the value of vaccinations and road safety.



*Girls in Samangan combine literacy courses with development of skills that will enable them to earn money.  
Picture: Anastasia Taylor-Lind*

Zarlasht Halaimzai spent her childhood in Afghanistan but left with her family when she was 10 years old. After travelling for four years round Central Asia they settled in London, where she now lives. Zarlasht presently works as a Studio Schools

Development Officer, having previously worked for Demos, New Internationalist and Afghanaid.

The situation for Afghan women is dire still. Afghan women do not have the rights promised to them eight years ago. An ordinary Afghan woman still risks her life if she wants an education and even if she wins the support of her family, she will not have the same access to education as men do. Women's healthcare too, is woeful. According to Save the Children, a woman in Afghanistan dies every 27 seconds from pregnancy related complications. We are accustomed to seeing women covered by a burqa, begging on the streets of Afghanistan with a dirty child in tow; self-immolating women lying in hospital beds, disfigured, with little hope of survival; little girls laboriously carrying heavy buckets of water.

But I do not want to write about Afghan women. The facts about the conditions of women in Afghanistan are not secret. In August 2009 I watched and listened to several programmes about Afghanistan including BBC Panorama, which reported specially on the situation of women.

***To me it does not make sense talking about Afghan women until we clarify the basic premise of the war. Their fate depends on the outcome of the war in Afghanistan and that outcome is still not clear.***

British involvement in Afghanistan has become a given. We have become apathetic to government debates and promises of a 'win' in Afghanistan. We are aware of a war 'happening' somewhere far away. At once Afghanistan conjures images of our worst nightmares, immediately followed by unrealistic promises of a 'fixed state'.

Only when we hear news of the death of a young British soldier are we shaken and reminded of the reality of war. Still we feel that there is nothing we can do. Increasingly the British public wants the troops to leave Afghanistan, as it seems to be a hopeless and complicated situation.

As an Afghan who has experienced the war, I do not want the troops to leave and I believe that the majority of Afghans share my view. I am encouraged by the degree of commitment from the international community to 'fix' Afghanistan, however it is not clear to me how this is going to happen and in the eyes of the British public it is not clear why.

The war in Afghanistan began with the aim of eradicating Al-Qaeda and quickly moved to promises of liberating Afghan people, especially women, and creating a prosperous democracy.

Since then the reasons for the war have moved forward and backwards. As one analyst pointed out it has become 'a graveyard of expectation' as even the most experienced politicians cannot predict events in Afghanistan.

Furthermore both sides of the Atlantic seem to be crippled by implausible optimism about their capabilities. In the first weeks the new Obama administration was optimistic about the counterinsurgency doctrine even if one study predicted that the average length of such a campaign is fourteen years.

Some officials have predicted that likely length of British involvement in Afghanistan is 40 years. This to me is utterly unrealistic. There is no way that the American or the British public would support such a lengthy war.

There seem to be two issues at play here; what is best for Afghanistan and what is best for the allies. The British and the American governments seem to be plagued by the dilemma you face when you bite off more than you can chew. The view seems to be that we are morally obliged to see this war through and failure is simply not an option, even if we don't know what a win situation would look like.

As much as I would like for unlimited funding to flow to Afghanistan and for the troops to stay indefinitely, I know that this is simply not possible.

A solution that serves both the interests of Afghan people and protects Britain from terrorism is likely to be 'light touch'. The current approach of 'state building' is unsustainable and will most likely to be exhausted very soon.

The truth is that the international effort in Afghanistan lacks the knowledge, legitimacy and leadership to see this war through. Afghanistan has an extremely complicated history, demographic and political landscape. Despite the fact that I grew up there and have followed the events closely since a very young age, I still have trouble understanding the subtle complexities.

But this is not to say that it is impossible to begin the process of real change in Afghanistan. By creating unrealistic expectations and not admitting our shortcomings we are making failure the only option.

In 1992 when the Soviet Union was defeated, Afghans expected a continuation of support from the international community. We hoped that the fall of USSR would mean the end of the war and the beginning of a democratic Afghanistan. Instead the international community abandoned

Afghanistan and so began a bloody civil war that led to the rise of the Taliban and the terrorist attacks in New York.

We must rebuild Afghanistan but we can only do this when we are honest about what we can achieve. As tempting as it is to believe that we can change the fate of Afghan women quickly, it will take decades to change the cultural attitudes that place women at the bottom of the society even if we succeed in creating a secure, democratic and economically productive society.

The idea that Britain or the US will maintain a military involvement in Afghanistan for as long as it takes to do this is utterly unrealistic. By admitting this we can open the door for debate and alternative solutions that focus on what we can realistically achieve.



*The lucky ones - these children enjoy the shelter of a Kabul orphanage. Some have mothers who cannot afford to keep them. Picture: Tom Stoddart.*

## Recommendations

- Identify clear objectives: The counterterrorism policy towards Afghanistan seems to have a narrow focus - fighting terrorism - and very broad definitions of how this is to be achieved. Hundreds of objectives have been defined from the liberation of women, to establishing democracy; from creating a viable economy to reducing the opium trade. This is not helpful in rallying public support either here or in Afghanistan. By identifying a few achievable objectives that we can articulate without resorting to complicated jargon, Britain can win back public support and work towards practical solutions.
- Focus on realistic long term solutions: The worst-case scenario for all Afghans would be a repeat of events in 1992 where the international community exhausted its enthusiasm and money to help Afghans. It is important that Afghanistan remains a priority. By making realistic commitments we can ensure a long-term involvement, which is the only way to have a meaningful, long-lasting impact.
- Encourage leadership from within the global Afghan community: I strongly believe that the community of Afghan expats around the world can play a hugely important role in rebuilding Afghanistan. Each Afghan that has moved back has brought back not only essential skills but also democratic values. For Afghanistan to move forward, leadership both ideological and political, must come from Afghans, as only they will have the knowledge and legitimacy to run their own country. Expats should be encouraged and incentivised to return.

Katie Taylor is Programme Development & Grants Coordinator of War Child. War Child is an award winning charity that works with local partner organisations to protect marginalised children - street children, child soldiers and children in prison - in places that are acutely affected by conflict such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Northern Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. See: [www.warchild.org.uk](http://www.warchild.org.uk)

Juvenile justice issues are inexorably tied up in the overall absence of rule of law in Afghanistan. While the government passed a Juvenile Code in 2005, offering strong protection (on paper) to children in conflict with the law, this law has barely been applied. In fact, UNICEF noted that two years after the adoption of the Juvenile Code, “many of the authorities in charge of its implementation are even unaware of the rules stipulated.”

Authorities’ lack of knowledge and the system’s lack of resources can lead to direct violations of children’s fair trial and protection rights. For example, in a focus group discussions with girls detained in a Juvenile Rehabilitation Centre (JRC) in May 2009, several girls complained that their defence lawyers had not represented them properly. They explained that the lawyer only spoke in the first hearing and was silent during other parts of the trial. Furthermore, there were ten cases in the previous year in which WCUK had to intervene with courts because children were not given legally-mandated representation. During the same period, WCUK discovered and intervened on behalf of eight cases of children detained despite the fact that they were below the age of legal responsibility according to Afghan law.

In the absence of knowledge of the existing laws, as well as the absence of resources to implement that law, police, prosecutors, defence lawyers and judges rely on customary sources and interpretations of law. Thus, not only are children generally denied their fair trial rights, they are often prosecuted for “crimes” which are not actually illegal under the criminal code (such as running away from home) as the justice system is used for moral control.

As a result, many children are charged and detained who would not be if Afghan law was properly applied. Once they have been detained, they (particularly girls) are often stigmatised to such an extent that there can be no return to normal life.

Girls who are detained are likely to experience a series of violations of their protection rights. The majority are arrested for running away from home - often in response to abuse or to avoid a forced marriage. AIHRC found that 56% of girls in JRCs across Afghanistan were charged with so-called ‘moral offences’ including running away from home or adultery. Running away may be seen as the only escape for some girls who face violence, abuse or forced marriage.

***“Women who report violence to police are at risk of imprisonment, further abuse by police or of being returned to unsafe, violent homes... These girls often remain in police custody for prolonged periods, because of the danger they face if they return to their families.”***

Salient social attitudes condemn girls who are considered to have dishonoured their families by running away, coming into conflict with the law or being detained. Thus, girls released from detention often experience abuse from their family - which can extend to “honour killings” or coerced suicide.

According to focus group interviews carried out by WCUK in one JRC in May 2009, the overriding concern of the mothers of the detained girls - as well as of the girls themselves - is to not be under detention in the first place. Unsurprisingly, mothers were much more concerned with securing their girls’ release than with the conditions that the girls endure in the JRC. One girl immediately gave the response of “freedom” when asked what makes her happy as part of an ice-breaking activity in a focus group.

In the absence of authorities' knowledge of the Juvenile Code, as well as resources for its implementation, more and more girls and boys will be arrested and detained for non-crimes and petty crimes which would be better addressed through diversion.

## Recommendations

- Armed conflict and international intervention can often undermine the local justice system. The UK government should support conditions for rule of law by ensuring that British security concerns are not addressed at the expense of Afghan civilian rights;
- Engage in responsible donorship to build the capacity of the government's justice sector in a way that supports accountability to the Afghan people;
- Support Afghan civil society in its short-term role as a key service provider and its long-term role of giving voice to Afghan people to hold the government accountable and to address social attitudes which undermine children's rights.

Extract from the AIHRC-UNAMA Joint Monitoring of Political Rights, Presidential and Provincial Council Elections, Third Report 1 August – 5 October 2009. The full report can be accessed at <http://www.aihrc.org.af/>

### Women's participation in elections

“Although Afghan women have demonstrated increasing interest in political and electoral processes, the cumulative effects of insecurity and cultural norms preventing women from participating in public life continue to represent significant barriers to women's participation. Women's ability to vote was very much dependent upon local conditions”  
\* \* \* \*

### Extract from letter written in Paktia province after the 2009 elections:

“My question is, why do they do not imagine the problems which local people are facing because of the voting?”

I am sure that you have heard in the news but I saw the video that the Taliban's' cutting the local people fingers whom participate in the voting because the colour left on their fingers and also the people who did not vote and there were no colour on their fingers, the Taliban put the colour on their finger till they did not allowed to vote and it looks that they already vote once.

I really don't know that what's going on? I have never seen such a kind of politics in my whole life.

Have you seen some of the poor refugees' families interviewed by the Ariana TV during the month of Ramadan?

Really, when I saw that news in the TV, I cried for those kids and the family members that they had nothing to eat but if we just look to the other side, most of the candidates for the Presidential and Provincial Council Election have been spent too much money for the publication of their pictures, paid cash money to some parties/ groups and individuals, travels, Transportations and daily meeting in high profile hotels, but nobody care about those families that they had nothing to eat.

I am an Afghan Citizen and I have my family, I am working in an Office and getting salary which can afford the monthly expenses of my family members but I swear when I saw such a kind of families, I just went out to the town and bought some food for them, but why those rich people cannot feel the bad economical condition of those families?”

The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) is the oldest independent political/social organisation of Afghan women struggling for peace, freedom, democracy and women's rights in Afghanistan. It was founded in 1997.

Text and images reproduced by kind permission of RAWA [www.rawa.org](http://www.rawa.org)

There never has been any reliable demographic statistics on Afghanistan for the past two decades. Of the estimated 16 million Afghans at the end of the 70s, over two million have been killed in the war of resistance against Soviet occupiers and later on in the civil war unleashed by fundamentalist groupings enjoying the support of foreign powers.



Another one and half million have been maimed by the war fallout, while nearly five million have been forced into refugee camps in Iran and Pakistan. The majority of the population left inside the country have been internally displaced as a result of the unending war of the past two decades and in particular of the fundamentalist in-fighting from 1992-96.

At the best of times the overall literacy rate was less than 20% amongst males and less than 5% amongst females. (These figures are considered by some as very optimistic.) Against such a backdrop, the country slid into the hands of Islamic fundamentalists in 1992 which was regarded as a tragedy for women's rights.

Islamic fundamentalism of any kind in essence looks upon women as sub-humans, fit only for household slavery and as a means of procreation. Such an outrageous view was elevated to the status of official policy with the coming to power of the ignorant Taliban. Not only the Jihadis (Northern Alliance etc.) and Taliban but all Islamists (advocates of an Islamic political system) target women's rights as a first priority, citing mediaeval Sharia (Islamic law) as their authority.

With the coming to power of Islamic fundamentalists in 1992, women's rights to full participation in social, economic, cultural and political life of the country were drastically curtailed and later summarily denied them by the Taliban.

Under the latter, women were totally deprived of the right to education (all girls' school were closed down), of the right to work (all women were ordered to remain in their houses and employers were threatened with dire consequences for taking up female employees), of the right to travel (no woman could venture out of the house alone and unaccompanied by a prescribed male member of the woman's immediate family), of the right to health (no woman could see a male doctor, family planning was outlawed, women could not be operated upon by a surgical team containing a male member), of the right to legal recourse (a woman's testimony was worth half a man's testimony; a woman could not petition the court directly - this had to be done through a prescribed male member of her immediate family), of the right to recreation (all women's recreational and sporting facilities had been banned, women singers could not sing least their female voices 'corrupt' males, etc.), and of the right to being human (they could not show their faces in public to male strangers, they could not wear bright colored clothing, they could not wear make up, they could only appear outside their houses clad head to foot in shapeless bags called burqas, they could not wear shoes with heels that click [least the clicking sound of their feet corrupt males], they could not travel in private vehicles with male passengers, they did not have the right to raise

*"If you are freedom loving and anti-fundamentalist, you are with RAWA."*

their voices when talking in public, they could not laugh loud as it lures males into corruption, etc. etc.)

This incredible list could be carried on and on but does not in itself constitute the whole of the tragedy which has engulfed the better half of Afghan society. Women are looked upon as war booty, their bodies are another battleground for belligerent parties.

Atrocities in Bosnia pale when compared to atrocities in Afghanistan, but unfortunately for reason which it may not be appropriate to go into in this context, the world community neither heard nor cared about what was going on in Afghanistan. Beating up of women for 'disciplinary' reasons on the slightest pretext (wearing brightly coloured shoes or thin stockings, having their bare ankles show when they walk, having their voices raised when they speak, having the sound of their laughter reach the ears of men strangers, having their heels click when walking etc.) was a routine phenomenon in Afghanistan under the Taliban.

Through such public beatings (which more often than not have resulted in death or disablement of the victim) the Taliban had cowed the civilian population into submission.



With the fundamentalists' war mentality, and fanned by ethnic hatred and religious bigotry, all areas that come under their control are regarded as occupied land and the inhabitants are treated accordingly. Sexual crimes against women, gang raping, lust murders, abductions of young females, blackmail of families with eligible daughters, etc. were commonplace during the rule of the pre-Taliban fundamentalists, who now once again have key positions in the government of Hamid Karzai

and are free to brutalize Afghan women in areas under their domination.

In connection with custodial violence against women, documentation of sexual violence against women during times of conflict and violence against refugee and internally displaced women we would first and foremost like to refer you to Amnesty International's reports such as *WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN: A human rights catastrophe* (March 1995) or *AFGHANISTAN: International responsibility for human rights disaster* (November 1995), as an eloquent testimony to the situation of women under the fundamentalists.

You may find many more such documents on the web site of Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. Apart from the above, you can find a number of eyewitness accounts of atrocities by the Taliban and their Jehadi brothers on our web site.

After the 9/11 tragedy, when the US began bombing Afghanistan on October 7, 2001, the oppression of Afghan women was used as a justification for overthrowing the Taliban regime. Five weeks later America's first lady, Laura Bush, stated triumphantly: "Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women".

But unfortunately the reality shows a different picture. The people of the world should know that though the disgusting, ludicrous and oppressive rule of Taliban was over in our ill-fated Afghanistan, but this never means the end of the horrible miseries of our tortured women.

Because contrary to the aspirations of our people and expectations of the world community, the Northern Alliance, these brethren-in-creed of the Taliban and Al-Qaida are again in power and generously supported by the US government. Yes it has completely shattered the dream of our wounded people for liberation from the heavy chains of the Taliban tyranny, because the NA is nothing but a fragile coalition of a "batch of bandits" - according to the UN especial envoy - with a long list of crimes and brutalities against our people.

Afghan people will never forgive them for the crimes they committed along with the so-called older generation of the Alliance. In Kabul alone 65,000 were killed during these bloody years. Leaders of the Northern Alliance have no ideological difference from the Taliban. Some of them may talk even about "elections" and "women's rights", but in fact they are as much misogynist as the Taliban. The war in Afghanistan has removed the Taliban, which so far does appear to be an improvement for women in certain limited parts of the country. In other areas, the incidence of rape and forced marriage is on the rise again, and most women continue to wear the burqa out of fear for their safety. The level of everyday violence in Afghanistan is something we would find it hard to



imagine. "War on terrorism" has removed the Taliban, but it has not removed religious fundamentalism which is the main cause of all our miseries. It will require a very different approach indeed for those evils to be eliminated, which is RAWA's point.

By reinstalling the warlords in power in Afghanistan, the US is ultimately replacing one fundamentalist regime with another. Karzai has gathered all criminals around him and even

some top Taliban leaders like Mullah Ghaus, Hakim Mujahid (Taliban spokesperson who was on a US tour only months before 9/11), Wakil Ahmad Motawakal (Taliban Foreign Minister), Mullah Zaheef (Taliban Ambassador in Pakistan), Mullah Hotaki, Mullah Arsala etc. have been forgiven by Mr. Karzai and allowed to open their office in Kabul.

Instead of appearing in the court of justice for their crimes, in the name of "moderate Taliban" these criminal and misogynist elements are coming in political scene once again because the US policy in Afghanistan require such deals with them. This is indeed an unforgivable and treasonable deal against our nation and especially our ill-fated women. It is due to such dealings of Karzai government and his US masters with terrorist warlords that Taliban-like decrees are still in place on our unfortunate women

It was on April 23, 2005 that Amina, a 29 year-old woman was publicly stoned to death on the basis of a district court's decision in northern province of Badakhshan who was accused of committing adultery.

Whenever there are fundamentalists, there will be hostility against women and RAWA's struggle for women's rights will not be over. Beside the fundamentalists' crimes against women, old traditions also regard women as second sex and they are suppressed, so RAWA's mission for women's rights is far from over and we have to work hard for women's rights in Afghanistan. We need the solidarity and support of all people around the world.

Many of the people approached to make contributions to this publication were supportive of its aims but unable to write bespoke pieces. They were, however, willing to signpost the editors to some of their already published material - plus a range of images, proverbs, reports, websites and ephemera that add dimension to *The Female Face of Afghanistan*. It has not been possible to include all but a selection of those offered follows.

### **Dr. Elaheh Rostami Povey on the Position of Women in Afghanistan**

*Department of Development Studies, Faculty of Law and Social Sciences -School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London University. This paper is a part of a project titled 'Afghan women's resistance and struggle in Afghanistan and diasporic communities' funded by Economic & Social Research Council, UK (Reference No: RES-000-22-0762).*

A major justification for the war was that it would improve the position of women. Four years after the US led invasion of Afghanistan, there is very little evidence to demonstrate improvements for women and girls. . . . girls can go to school, but school buildings are unsafe and there are severe shortages of teachers, facilities and equipments. The new constitution guarantees women's equal rights with men. However, continuing religious and cultural conservatism and a dangerous security environment are real obstacles to women's participation in economy, politics and society.

The regional and local warlords, who were the key allies of America against the Taliban and Al-Qaida, are not women's rights advocates and the invasion forces are not interested in the warlords' treatment of women. In most of Afghanistan, the rule of the warlords' guns is more of a reality than the rule of law. Women suffer under the condition of violence, fear and intimidation, as they remain at risk of sexual violence.

The practice of exchanging girls and young women to settle feuds or to repay debts continues, as do high rates of early and forced marriage.

The Western media have reported Afghan's access to satellite TV, Bollywood films, mobile phones and

internet as a positive development. Taking into consideration the level of poverty and lack of electricity, very few Afghans have access to the television stations across the country. For those who can afford this luxury the choice is to watch American style cop violence movies or Bollywood movies which advocate subjugation of women to men and the family.

Many Afghan women's rights activists are worried about the Bollywood romance films messages which are all about women's submission to the husband and his family's tradition.

Love affairs between a rich man and a poor girl will start with romance, music and dance and will end up in traditional marriage, the wife obeying the husband and his family or else they face domestic violence.

The relative availability of cheap mobile phones for a minority of young men and women in Kabul and a few other urban centres may mean that boys and girls can text each other and meet each other in internet cafes. Many religious conservative families do not consider the internet cafes an appropriate place for their daughters, as pornography is freely available on line in internet cafes. There are many young girls in jail who have been put in jail by their male relatives.

### **Paula Lerner's personal tribute to Sitara Achakzai**

Article and Multimedia Feature on an inspirational Afghan woman whose bravery cost her her life.

The story and multimedia feature can be viewed on:

[www.altmuslimah.com/a/b/a/3409/](http://www.altmuslimah.com/a/b/a/3409/)

Other work - including Afghan Stories Updated, Photographs by Paula Lerner - is now on view at:

<http://galleries.lernerphoto.com/afghanstories/>

### **Zahir Tanin**

Statement of H.E. Dr. Zahir Tanin Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Afghanistan to the United Nations at the Security Council Open Debate on Women, Peace, and Security - 11.1009

His address concludes:

*"Above all, in our political pursuit of national reconciliation, we must not break the promise that we made to ourselves and to Afghan women in 2001. We cannot betray women's rights and security in exchange for a shallow peace in Afghanistan, because in doing so we would betray our own hope for a stable future. We must instead unite around the ideal of equal justice and rights for all.*

*Thank you, Mr. President."*

<http://www.mfa.gov.af/detail.asp?Lang=e&Cat=1&ContID=1094>

### **Sippi Azarbaijani-Moghaddam**

Sippi Azarbaijani-Moghaddam is consultant currently working on links between community level organisations and sub-national governance in Afghanistan. She has worked in Afghanistan for thirteen years and is a fluent Dari speaker, although her recent work has mostly taken her to work on local perceptions of civil-military relations in the Pushtun-speaking provinces of the south and east.

Sippi is the author of a contribution on "The Arrested Development of Afghan Women" – from The United States Institute of Peace report on The Future of Afghanistan. It can be found at:

<http://www.usip.org/files/resources/foa.pdf>

### **The Funders Network for Afghan Women**

May 2009: FNAW announced the release of its policy briefing paper, "Getting It Right: Security, Peace and Development for Afghan Women" with recommendations for the best ways of supporting the women of Afghanistan. The full text is at:

<http://www.funders-afghan-women.org/documents/FNAW-Brief-May-8.pdf>

# Summary of recommendations

This summary incorporates the recommendations from those who have made contributions to this publication. Because many of their recommendations overlapped, we have attempted to summarize and précis their views below. Some of the views are contradictory. Although they are not totally comprehensive, they do, however, highlight many of the areas where changes and actions could significantly improve the lives of women in Afghanistan, as well as offering some suggestions of how these changes could be brought about.

## INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

### Hold an international conference to examine how the situation for women could be improved in Afghanistan

- The conference could look into all aspects of women's life in Afghanistan – education, health, laws and regulations, political participation, skill training etc.
- It must enable Afghan women to come and present ideas
- Invite other Muslim countries to come and share their successes on empowering women

## WOMEN'S ORGANISATIONS

### Give direct long term funding to Afghan women's organisations

- Recognise the importance of Afghan women's civil society organisations
- Afghan women's organisations can be a vehicle for campaigning to improve the situation for women and girls
- They are sensitive to both societal values and the political environment
- Afghan women's organisations need to have access to both financial and technical long term resources to ensure continued growth, development and capacity
- They provide services where no others exist
- Use women's organisations to deliver rights-awareness training to help women deal with the male-dominated environment
- Collect data on violence against women

## EDUCATION

### Provide education for women and girls

- Create more schools for girls (and boys)
- Increase investment in education and improve access at all levels
- Invest in teacher training to bring up standards
- More teachers are desperately needed - incentive programmes should be introduced to encourage more teachers, especially women, to work in rural areas
- Consider incentives for children to attend school eg. a universal midday meal
- Ensure that girls can get safely to school

## HEALTHCARE

### Provide access to healthcare

- Improve maternity services, especially in rural areas – maternal mortality is the second highest in the world
- Improve infant mortality – 1 in 4 children die before 5 years old
- Increase the number of female health workers significantly, particularly nurses and midwives
- Consolidate all training programmes to offer nationally recognised certificated competence based programmes
- Among other things train community-based nurses and midwives
- Involve children in public health projects and educate them about nutrition
- Introduce a vaccination policy

## RADIO STATIONS

### As most women have access to a radio, use radio to reach women

- Make sure BBC Pashto gets all the support it can
- Set up more independent radio stations
- Use radio stations to highlight women's issues and violence against women

# Summary of recommendations

## WOMEN IN THE WORKPLACE

### Help women to become active participants in the economy

- Create jobs and vocational training opportunities for women
- Support projects and programs that give women training in skills
- Encourage investors to create jobs, businesses and markets
- Engage with local elders to persuade them that their communities will benefit if women are allowed to enter the workplace
- Remove legal barriers so that women can work without having to consult their husbands or male relatives
- Use successful models which have helped women in other Muslim countries
- Encourage women to start businesses
- Encourage microfinance projects and other similar development initiatives
- Educate men that their households will earn a higher income by women working and have a better standard of living
- Help create direct links between women entrepreneurs and market supply chains to ensure that women's businesses are sustainable
- Encourage and support women to train in non-traditional activities to help women break out of the traditional mould
- Create a new Business and Enterprise Investment Fund for women and female entrepreneurs

## WOMEN IN POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT

### Support Afghan women MPs and ensure that women are in decision-making positions

- Fund mentoring programmes for Afghan women MPs
- Ensure that women MPs are equal in power to male MPs
- Ensure that women in government are part of the decision-making process
- Increase the number of women in government institutions and ensure that they actively participate in decision-making processes
- Encourage the Afghan Government to adopt and implement affirmative action and professional development policies to correct the gender imbalance at all levels
- Marginalization, discrimination or harassment of women should be countered with zero tolerance

## LEGISLATION AND JUSTICE

### The Afghan Government should ensure that women are protected under the law, that the law is enforced and that women can obtain justice

- Oppose discriminatory legislation – Afghanistan is a signatory to CEDAW – the UN convention to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women
- Hold the Afghan Government accountable for the promises made under the national documents such as Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS), Afghanistan Compact, JCEMB and other promises made during the London and Paris conferences
- The Afghan Government should recognize that violence against women is a crime within the civil and family law
- Tackle violence against women in Afghanistan urgently
- Perpetrators of crimes against women should be brought to justice and not given impunity
- Oppose the recent Shiite Personal Status Law which affects up to 20% of Afghan women
- Engage in responsible donorship to build the capacity of the government's justice sector

## SECURITY

### **Security will help provide a better life for the women of Afghanistan**

- There is no security without development and no development without security – Afghans need to see that peace pays off and their lives improve as a result of stability
- Identify clear achievable objectives
- Invest more resources in training for the Afghan military so that they can provide security
- Work for a political settlement in Afghanistan involving all tendencies
- Work to reduce external extremist influences
- Ensure that proportionate force is exercised by the military in all situations and that air power is kept to a minimum to preserve both the lives of civilians and soldiers
- Timely, public apologies and adequate and regular compensation are provided to families in the event of casualties
- Ensure that people upon capture are not subject to abuse
- End unnecessary destruction of property by the military
- Ensure that female officers are included in home searches and that searches do not contravene the dignity or customs of the community
- Improve intelligence gathering to help reduce the number of wrongful detentions

## AFGHAN POLICE FORCE

### **The Afghan police need to recruit many more women**

- At present there are only 675 policewomen out of a policeforce of 83,000
- Afghans must be able to rely on the policeforce to enforce the rule of law
- Invest more resources in training of policeforce to follow clear guidelines and adhere to human rights, particularly women's rights
- It is important to have policewomen to deal with domestic violence cases as Afghan women do not like dealing with men in the police
- Important to have more policewomen to search women to help stop drug trafficking
- Ensure that there are women at senior level in the police force
- Stop bullying of policewomen in the policeforce

## WIDOWS

### **Widows - who often have no means of support and can often be the most discriminated against and abused - need special help**

- Support Afghan Ministry of women to address widowhood issues
- Support Afghan widows to “band together” to form their own associations so as to have their voices heard
- Ensure that widowhood issues are mainstreamed in Constitution and Law reform, strategies to achieve MDGs , and implement CEDAW and Beijing Platform
- Support all efforts to fill gap in data on Afghan widowhood, and gather information via Mapping and profiling, in compliance with UN SCR 1325

## GENERAL

- Read and digest Afghan history and anthropology
- Consider the implications of the international environment surrounding Afghanistan
- Realise that foreign intervention, particularly by foreign governments or forces, is almost totally repugnant to the vast majority of Afghan men
- Internationalise and 'Afghanise' any direct assistance to Afghan women struggling for their rights
- Soften Afghan male attitudes
- Understand what is possible – there is a tendency sometimes to expect progress to be too rapid which can be counterproductive
- Focus on realistic long term solutions – by making realistic commitments we can ensue a long-term involvement, which is the only way to have a meaningful, long-lasting impact
- Take slower routes to practice gender equality in Afghanistan not by calling for more war
- Encourage leadership from within the global Afghan community
- Experience shows that women will put the interests of their family before everything else; give a woman \$10 and she will almost always spend it to the benefit of her family – rarely does this mean buying a weapon

