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Renew Approach to Gender Programming

Background

Significant efforts have been made to improve the situation of women in Afghanistan. Some of these have yielded notable results: legal provisions to protect and promote women's rights, important strides in women's access to health and education, and a visible presence of women – particularly in urban centers – in all facets of public life. Afghanistan's Decade of Transformation (2015-2024) is marked by heightened sense of uncertainty, insecurity, and political and economic instability, however.

With the support of favorable policies and programs since 2001, Afghan women have increasingly demanded – and received – significant improvements in their access to public services and treatment by their male peers. Some of the most visible signs of progress are the increased numbers of girls attending school and women working in public offices including schools, hospitals and government offices as civil servants, and within civil society and development organizations.

Women's integration into decision-making, however, remains wanting both at the institutional and grass-root levels. At the institutional level, women's political participation is often presented in terms of the quota of seats reserved for women in the Parliament, Provincial Councils, and Community

Development Councils with little attention paid to the conditions necessary for women's continued presence in these entities and their ability to make a difference. At the grass-root level, women's participation in decision-making is severely limited and there remain numerous barriers to women's access to work, healthcare, education, and justice.

The reduction in 2013-2014 of the quota for female provincial council members in Afghanistan from 25 percent to 20 demonstrates the tenuousness of relatively high numbers of females in different structures of government. Indeed, many have argued that the rapid proliferation of measures soon after 2001 to bring Afghanistan in line with international conventions and charters on women's rights has in fact created a backlash against such measures.

The successful attempt by a sizable number of parliamentarians to reduce the quota for women in provincial councils, and attempts by others elsewhere against legal provisions for women's rights, are manifestations of this backlash and polarization. In the meantime, the Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW), signed into law through a presidential decree, has come under heavy debate in the

Parliament since late 2013 with little or no prospect of being approved by the Parliament without major changes

being demanded by the traditionalist / conservative factions.

Similarly, since mid-2013, there have been increased pressures by the more conservative members of Parliament to weaken sections of the Criminal Code deemed inappropriate or inconsistent with strict interpretations of Islam.

During the December 2014 London Conference the host of international donors renewed their commitments to Afghanistan with the condition that there be measurable improvements for women in terms of opportunities and access to and control over productive assets and income.

Translating commitments on women's rights into action will need to be based on recognition that past actions in women-centered programs have been insufficiently informed in terms of policy and program design, lacked clear or effective implementation plans, and lacked insufficient input from Afghans since the bulk of the larger projects are implemented through international development businesses. The common thread running through all large internationally supported gender mainstreaming programming seems to be the absence of lessons learned and the many challenges that persist and impede women-centered interventions.

With the notable exception of the National Action Plan for the implementation of the United Nations' Security Council Resolution 1325 (NAP 1325), gender policies have lacked contextual knowledge, rendering many of the myriad of gender policies for Afghanistan superficial and on-paper-only statements. The National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) is one such policy.

Gender programming in Afghanistan has been broadly understood as programming for women, rarely taking into account the impact of women-centred programming on gender relations. A common practice among the vast majority of the donors is to favour women-only organizations as privileged implementing partners without proper capacity building or mentoring, oversight or project evaluation to assess impact, and with minimal dialogue on means to constructively engage men and boys at all levels of society – despite the fact that many women's rights activists from Afghanistan have been raising concerns that

without men's support and engagement, women's rights will be extremely difficult to institutionalize in Afghanistan.

On June 30, 2015 Afghanistan adopted its National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (WPS) for the implementation of UNSCR 1325. The momentum created by the National Unity Government's issuance of NAP 1325 creates an opportunity for not making the same mistake as with NAPWA. Dialogue, applied research, program funding, capable national and international experts, monitoring, periodic assessments, and constructive advocacy will be crucial for making NAP 1325 work for Afghan women and men.

That little or nothing in practice has happened as a direct result of NAPWA since 2008 or NAP 1325 since June 2015 should not lead to the conclusion that these two policy documents have no utility. Rather, the challenge for the government, the international donors, and civil society is to find ways of using these two key instruments as legitimacy for their proposed actions on improving the conditions of women in Afghanistan.

A key step in this direction is to link the significant, albeit ad hoc, gains made for women through sectoral policies in such key sectors as education, health, and justice to the objectives of NAPWA and NAP 1325 – and consistent with Sustainable Development Goal 5 and PROMOTE program activities – and to use this mix of policy instruments and resources to place legitimate demands on the government (and its international donors) to allocate adequate human and financial resources for ensuring basic and sustainable rights for women.

The limited but critical research on gender mainstreaming in Afghanistan has documented significant gaps in efforts to mainstream gender in Afghanistan, whether through policies or development. At the same time, there is increasing recognition among the development community that approaches to gender programming and implementation need to evolve to be more flexible, adaptive, and inclusive. The Government of Afghanistan has also demonstrated clear political will to support gender mainstreaming in policy development and implementation. The following recommendations are intended for a new dialogue on how

Despite claims about NAPWA being a major political accomplishment, it remains in practical terms a well-intended statement of goals and objectives on women's many needs without practical implications.

best to mainstream gender in Afghanistan.

Recommendations

Gender mainstreaming is “a strategy for making women’s as well as men’s concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated.”

- United Nations (1997)

- **Focus on Gender Mainstreaming Rather Than Women Highlighting:** A major concern highlighted in several reports is the lingering misunderstanding of what gender mainstreaming entails.¹ Gender mainstreaming has been consistently equated with women’s rights, which, while an integral component of gender mainstreaming in patriarchal societies such as Afghanistan, is only one of its key elements. This approach has been described as “women highlighting”.² Systematic re-education on gender in society and gender mainstreaming will be needed in preparation for meeting NAP 1325 objectives.
 - **Include Boys and Men:** Though acknowledged in theory, and insisted upon by some of the key women’s rights specialists in and outside Afghanistan, the inclusion of men and boys in gender programming remains minimal or poorly formulated. Concrete measures for the protection and prevention of violence against women, girls and boys, and the inclusion of men and boys in dialogues on gender should be undertaken as part of the preparations for NAP 1325.
 - **Replace Flag-waving with Constructive Advocacy:** Advocacy for gender rights and gender mainstreaming has become, in practice, women’s rights activism. While rights activism is and should be an integrated component of advocacy, the “flag-waving” approach of demanding attention to women’s needs is insufficient to bring about sustainable change.
- New approaches, including training and mentoring, should be devised for constructive and evidence-based advocacy. Efforts should also be made to change dominant views on gender relation in Afghanistan through dialogue, incentives, and changes in education curricula.
- **Link Sectoral Policies and Instruments to Broader Goals:** Utilize existing policies and actual gains made for women in the implementation of NAP 1325 by making linkages to the Constitutions, health, education, women in government, women in business, and women in public life.
 - **Build on Lessons Learned from Other Contexts:** Little attention has been paid to gender mainstreaming initiatives in other Islamic societies. Lessons could be drawn from Iranian civil society, for instance, which has spearheaded initiatives to secure the place of women in the public space, various professions, and universities despite ongoing resistance by the government establishments and threats and pressure from the religious and political hardliners.
 - **Understand Gender in Afghan Context:** Both international and national stakeholders need to have a sound understanding of gender relations in Afghanistan and key lessons from the experience of promoting women’s rights in Afghanistan. This can be achieved through training the staff of major donor and development agencies based on applied research carried out in Afghanistan by Afghans and others.

1 See, for example, Wordsworth, A. (2008), “Moving to Mainstream: Integrating Gender In Afghanistan’s National Policy.”(Kabul: AREU)

2 Abirafteh, L. (2005). “Lessons From Gender-focused International Aid in Post-Conflict Afghanistan... Learned?” (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung)