The Dilemma of Women and Leadership in Afghanistan: Lessons and Recommendations

Introduction

A new chapter of Afghan history has been written. The Government of National Unity is formed. The Bilateral Security Agreement and the Status of Forces Agreement are signed with the United States and NATO. President Ghani has ordered a re-examination of the Kabul Bank Dossier[1], instigated the development of legislation on harassment in educational institutions,[2] and promised to appoint a female judge to the Supreme Court bench,[3] not to forget the unprecedented[4] act of publicly acknowledging his wife, Rula Ghani, whom he addressed as "BibiGul", for her dedication to the cause of women's rights during his inaugural speech[5] on 29 September 2014. While Afghans hope that positivity will prevail and good work will continue, both in words and in deeds, it is time for the concept of women's leadership and the assumptions underlying women's empowerment polices and strategies of the past 12 years to receive a reflective and depersonalized critical revisiting, with an aim to orient the work of the new establishment and its national and international partners.

Observations: The Status Quo

Afghanistan is a rural, patriarchal, traditional and religious society. At almost all levels, decision-making dynamics are top-down and largely informal. Identity is shaped by factors such as ethnicity, social privilege, financial assets, or by one's authority—formal or informal—the source of which can be any of the above, or even the number of armed body guards and armored vehicles one possesses. [6] Afghan society is elitist at its core, populist in its aura, and misogynist in its heart, where women are secondary citizens, always one of four[7]: someone's daughter, sister, wife or mother. Those who are none of the above may well be perceived to have less dignity.

Social-cultural perspectives argue in favour of what are perceived as "natural"[8] roles for women and men, where what is "natural" depends on who defines it. "Women either at home or in the grave" is one of the commonly believed and practiced norms. Financial necessities or difficult circumstances have led some to break this norm, the most extreme form of which has been dressing girls as boys[9]. From Bibi Hakmeena[10] (Khost), praised for being "as man as any man", to Kaftar Bibi (Baghlan)[11], from ex-Member of Parliament Azita Rafat[12], to her daughter Mehrnoosh/Mehran[13], all are instances of women's creative but maladaptive[14]

1   Gabriel Domínguez, New probe into Kabul Bank scandal an 'important symbolic act', DW, October 3, 2014, http://www.dw.de/new-probe-into-kabul-bank-scandal-an-important-symbolic-act/a-17970853

2   Human Rights Watch, Afghanistan: Fight Rampant Sexual Harassment President Ghani Should Back Sweeping Reforms Now, October 14, 2014, http://www.hrw.org/news/2014/10/14/afghanistan-fight-rampant-sexual-harassment

3   Khama Press, Afghanistan to appoint female judge in SC for first time in history, October 30, 2014, http://www.khaama.com/afghanistan-to-appoint-female-judge-in-sc-for-first-time-in-history-8898

4   Queen Soraya has been the only precedence so far. For more, see: Tanya Goudsouzian, Afghan first lady in shadow of 1920s queen? October 1, 2014, http://www.aljazeera.com/news/asia/2014/09/afghan-first-lady-shadow-1920s-queen-2014930142515254965.html

5   Link to the video of President Ghani's Inaugural Speech: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gb2k1K16JAU

6   Personal and peer observations.

7   President Ghani has promised to change this. Sanjay Kumar, The Diplomat's interview with the new president of Afghanistan, October 2, 2014, http://thediplomat.com/2014/10/interview-ashraf-ghani/

8   Abdul Rab Rasul Sayyaf in exclusive interview with TOLOnews, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=X-vbumzc60o

9   Jenny Nordberg has documented this phenomenon in her recent book, "The Underground Girls of Kabul", Book review: 'The Underground Girls of Kabul,' by Jenny Nordberg, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/book-review-the-underground-girls-of-kabul-by-jenny-nordberg/2014/09/19/441e752e-0eb5-11e4-b8e5-d0de80767fc2_story.html

10   DW, 'King of the women' - an unlikely Afghan, October 13, 2011, http://www.dw.de/king-of-the-women-an-unlikely-afghan/a-15457529-1

11   Tom Coghlan, Afghanistan's feared woman warlord, March 16, 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/4806516.stm

12   Nushin Arbabzadah, Girls will be boys in Afghanistan, the Guardian, November 30, 2011, http://www.theguardian.com/global/2011/nov/30/afghanistan-girls-dressing-as-boys

13   BBC Farsi, Dressing Afghan Girls as Boys: The New Phenomenon, September 6, 2011, http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/afghanistan/2011/09/110906_l42_afgh_boy_girl.shtml

14   The term "maladaptive" refers to this exercise's value in relation to the practice of leadership: An act that does not serve the main purpose –streamlining women's real leadership role beyond conventional- can be considered maladaptive.

attempts at social participation in a man's role. The movie *Osama*[15] attempted to depict this situation, but without sufficient analysis of its cultural underpinnings and limited to only one period of Afghan political history: the Taliban rule.

Those who have tried to participate directly in the existing system and thus have stepped beyond the boundaries of women's conventional roles, even those as young as schoolgirls, have been targeted[16] because their attempt has been seen as a threat to the status quo. Though urbanization and online activism may depict a progressive social image, urban male dwellers expect female obedience at the least[17]. The periphery lacks, at least in practice, cultural consensus on women's social, political and economic participation outside the household. This is despite almost a century long reform history going back to the times of King Amanullah Khan in 1919 and Afghanistan's young demographic profile, commonly expected to facilitate social reform.

Today we have protective legal frameworks for women [18], public and private institutions with women's rights agendas, national long-term plans[19] designed to empower women, 3 million girls in school[20], women in positions of formal authority[21], and now a publicly active First Lady[22]. But what we see may well be an appearance, covering a stronger feudal structure where men make decisions that are oriented by indigenous power dynamics. This statement is based on the society being patriarchal[23], institutions being gender blind[24], and attention to women's issues driven by international presence[25]. Women's movement's lack of understanding of common Afghan women's urgent needs and weak prioritization capacity has led to frustratingly little impact on these power dynamics, and at times risked further widening the gap. Today, women's rights is one of the negotiable items of the peace talks[26], and one of the feared losses[27] shared by Afghans and the world, as international troops prepare to withdraw completely.

History in Abstract

11 September 2001 marked the initial event of the most recent global engagement in Afghanistan and determined the pace and nature of development interventions that followed. Women's emancipation helped justify[28] a political decision: the military engagement. As a result, the lines between age-old patriarchal dynamics and the Taliban rule were blurred. What followed was 12 years of mostly technical fixes to an adaptive situation, where two value-systems (constitutionally protected women's rights and values associated with women's conventional role at home) were in conflict. Today as a result, we have more of an on-paper[29] State acknowledgement of women's rights than public acceptance of the values of gender equality.

Defenders of women's right, based on a misdiagnosis of the context and dependence on the international narrative of women's emancipation, failed to question a major assumption: that women's rights matter to the majority of the Afghan population. The result was a misled strategy that did not focus on exploring avenues of helping women's rights make it to the list of people's urgent needs such as security, employment, shelter and health, despite having established the perceived necessary structure: the Ministry of Women Affairs (MoWA) and Ministerial Gender Units.

15   For description of the movie, see http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0368913/

16   Allie Torgan, Acid attacks, poison: What Afghan girls risk by going to school, CNN Heroes, August 2, 2012, http://www.cnn.com/2012/08/02/world/meast/cnnheroes-jan-afghan-school/index.html

17   Personal and peer observations.

18   UNAMA News Update, UN calls on Afghan authorities to ensure full implementation of EVAW law, May 20, 2013, http://unama.unmissions.org/default.aspx?ctl=Details&tabid=12254&mid=15756&ItemID=36838

19   Downloadable Chapters of NAPWA, MoWA's Website, http://mowa.gov.af/en/page/6686

20   USAID Fact sheet on Achievements in Afghanistan, August 2014, http://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1871/Achievements in Afghanistan.pdf

21   CBS News Series on the Women of the Afghan Parliament, http://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/the-women-of-afghanistans-parliament/

22   In conversation with ONETV, October 28, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tyzs9xriFSs&feature=youtu.be

23   For more, University of West Florida, Society and Norms – Family and Family Life: Overview, http://uwf.edu/atcdev/afghanistan/Society/Lesson1Family.html

24   On gender mainstreaming in Afghan government institutions, Sofya Shahab, Women's rights in Afghanistan: one step forward, two steps back? November 26, 2013 http://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2013/nov/26/womens-rights-afghanistan-gender-mainstreaming

25   Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, Women's Rights, Gender Equality, and Transition: Securing gains, moving forward, September 2013, http://www.areu.org.af/EditionDetails.aspx?EditionId=686&ContentId=7&ParentId=7

26   Massouda Jalal, Afghanistan: the blind pursuit of peace and reconciliation, March 6, 2013, https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/massouda-jalal/afghanistan-blind-pursuit-of-peace-and-reconciliation

27   Mushtaq Mojaddedi, Afghanistan's female taekwondo fighter fears return of Taliban, Gulf Times, September 18, 2014, http://www.gulf-times.com/Mobile/Afghanistan/219/details/408793/Afghanistan

28   For more, Lila Abu Loghud, Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others, http://org.uib.no/smi/seminars/Pensum/Abu-Lughod.pdf

29   Aarya Nijat, Governance in Afghanistan: An Introduction, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, March 2014, pp. 37-39. http://www.areu.org.af/EditionDetails.aspx?EditionId=730&ContentId=7&ParentId=7&Lang=en-US

Afghanistan's leadership dynamics facilitated extreme dependence of Afghans on international development *experts* who appeared to have technical *authority* in the field. The Women's Rights Based Approach[30] for example, added to the already complex context—religious and cultural value systems such as Islam and *Pashtunwali*, and exacerbated the levels of confrontation facing women—an already vulnerable social group, and government—an already weak and war torn institution.

Women and Leadership: A Dilemma

One of the factors leading to institutional inadequacies that contribute to the lack of women in leadership is the blurred line between leadership and authority[31]. Leadership capacity development is broadly perceived as enhancing one's authority. The qualities traditionally associated with leadership, and thus authority, and those associated with women do not match and thus make women look incapable of holding positions of authority. Given the patriarchal nature of the society and the top-down decision-making mechanisms, women's leadership is not much more than an ambiguous concept for most, rendering women leaders incomprehensible, the thought of which raises the question of "who is supporting her", meaning what man or group of men.

The gender blindness of government institutions speaks of Ministry of Women's Affairs and Ministerial Gender Units' inability to mainstream the issue of women's rights and gender equality in public institutions, let alone the majority of the population. How could they manage to pull this off? In a society where women are second-class citizens, an institution dealing with women's affairs alone cannot be but secondary and thus unimportant, weak and even ridiculed. As the only ministry with a policy making mandate, the Ministry of Women's Affairs has, perhaps by design and not intent, restricted other government ministries' capacity to initiate women-focused policy making processes, leading to further isolation of women's rights agenda within, and responsibility upon, one institution.

The existence of the Ministry of Women's Affairs therefore, and its style of operation has, at its core, contradicted the cross cutting nature of the theme of gender equality, and has thus facilitated, perhaps not intentionally, an isolationist approach to women empowerment. With only three years left until the completion of the implementation period of the 10 year National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (2007-2017), questions around its applicability to the Afghan context remain valid. This 10-year Plan is therefore increasingly seen as an example of an initiative that has taken place in an analytical vacuum, ignorant of the cultural clash between conventional and modern value systems.

From an organizational structure point of view the placement of Ministerial Gender Units under the administration office of each ministry instead of its policy office is to be blamed for their underperformance. But one could offer justification either way. The problem may not really be where Gender Units are placed, but whether it is necessary or useful to isolate a cross cutting theme like gender equality in one institution—MoWA—and its affiliated Gender Units.

Another dimension of the failure to establish and sustain organic linkage between gender equality as a cross cutting theme and decision-making has been the urban focused nature of reform[32] in the past 12 years, validated by the urban characteristic of women's movement. One must not assume however that urban workingwomen have it all "figured out". Despite their operational transition from home to the workspace, workingwomen are yet to transition from their male-dependent role at home (mostly for economic reasons) to a socio-economically independent role at the workplace. This inability is reflected in their desire to be appreciated, both morally and materially (observed almost uniformly throughout public and even private institutions), by senior officials, often being men. So what motivates them is not really working towards the organizational purpose but the acknowledgement that comes from someone with authority.[33] Failure of the public administration system to establish and ensure the functioning of effective employee appraisal mechanisms has further exacerbated this situation.

---

30   For more, Lila Abu Loghud, Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others, http://org.uib.no/smi/seminars/Pensum/Abu-Lughod.pdf

31   For more on the subject, Ronald Heifetz, Leadership Without Easy Answers, (Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1994).

32   Aarya Nijat, Governance in Afghanistan: An Introduction, Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, March 2014, p. 39. http://www.areu.org.af/EditionDetails.aspx?EditionId=730&ContentId=7&ParentId=7&Lang=en-US

33   Based on personal and peer observations of the nature of common practice of giving gifts or cash to women employees as part of commemorating international women's day, 8th March across private and public institutions in Afghanistan.

Recommendations

- Women can be leaders in Afghanistan, but leadership may not necessarily mean being in a position of authority[34], because authority does not guarantee the exercise of leadership. Leadership is an art; it is an act of doing. It pertains to being involved in the exercise of mobilizing people around a collectively defined sense of purpose that orients them towards improving their standard of living, a process that may not necessarily require authority as a prerequisite.

- The impediments to women's lead role in fostering social, economic and political reform may present itself in the form of women's internalization of the habit of being secondary, thus necessitating efforts aimed at building women's capacity to question this habit and step beyond it,[35] in addition to social recognition of the role of people on positions of authority –mostly men- that perpetuates this habit leading to change in the mindsets and practices of men.

- Three major contextual realities impede women's strengthened leadership role: lack of clarity on the role of women in the economic production, women's restricted mobility and absence of social-psychological security. It is imperative to understand that without an increased role of women in the economy, their political or social leadership cannot sustain. Without supporting women's mobility their capacity to access resources and opportunities and be accessible cannot be built; and without ensuring sustained social-psychological security to families, women's space outside their homes will always be limited and guarded.

- The duration of reform implementation must not weaken our willingness to challenge it, in particular when inclusive, substantial and genuine improvement is not observed. If a majority does not benefit from a reform, it has to at least be questioned. If a majority appears to resist reform, it may indicate the need to study, understand, and acknowledge the loss that the reform represents to them, and therefore, work on creating a safe space within which they can engage with the process of change and the loss it may consequently incur.[36]

- Technical reform must go hand in hand with long-term, collective, inclusive and adaptive processes of cultural transition and value shift because legislative initiatives, regulations, strategies, policy frameworks and guidelines (technical fixes for the most part) can only facilitate change, not guarantee it. The real responsibility for change belongs to the people who must change, through involvement in the process, in order for the transition to take place. Those people may not just be urban citizens, but the larger, less attended, marginalized, or even abused rural population of the country.

- The path to the future involves questioning not just women's empowerment policies and strategies, but also assumptions collectively held by Afghan and international advocates of women's rights and women's empowerment. This process will benefit from enhanced capacity of decision-makers, program developers and implementers and gender equality advocates to operate within and around the cycle of observation-intervention-reflection.[37] This exercise will need, as a major pre-requisite, to establish the relevance of gender equality to the larger socio-political and economic context of Afghanistan. The peace process is one such larger context.

- Afghanistan has been going through one form of reform or another for almost a century. But history shows that top-down reform agendas have failed. It is therefore no longer about *change*, but *sustainable and socially responsive change*, which among others will involve building mass capacity for habit and behavior questioning, value shift, and cultural transition—processes that necessitate patient persistence and involve men and women both, and which are going to take significantly longer than 12 years.

Aarya Nijat is a graduate of Harvard Kennedy School of Government, has worked on institutional development and governance in the Afghan Government, and is affiliated with Duran, a research and program assessment firm based in Kabul. She can be reached via aarya.nijat@post.harvard.edu Follow her on Twitter: @AaryaNijat

---

34　For more on the subject, Ronald Heifetz, Leadership Without Easy Answers, (Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1994), Dean Williams, Real Leadership: Helping People and Organizations Face their Toughest Challenges, (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2005).

35　Crossing this boundary does not and must not question human interdependence or the values associated with family and foundations of family in Afghanistan. At the heart of this exercise is the capacity to strike a balance between individual independence and collective social interdependence.

36　For more on the subject, Ronald Heifetz, Leadership Without Easy Answers, (Cambridge: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1994), Dean Williams, Real Leadership: Helping People and Organizations Face their Toughest Challenges, (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2005).

37　Ibid.