Freedom is Only Won From the Inside:
Domestic Violence in Post-Conflict Afghanistan
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Conflict in Afghanistan has had a disproportionately negative impact on women. Afghan women have borne the brunt of the violence and remain subjected to practices that reflect gender biases. While the international community still hopes to 'liberate' and 'empower' Afghan women in so-called post-conflict Afghanistan, gender[1] programs are struggling to take *gender* (in a robust sense of the word) into account. Afghan women are fighting to reverse perceptions that they have no agency, that they are victims. Yet they are experiencing increased levels of violence. Despite being four years beyond conflict and into peace in Afghanistan, violence against women – particularly domestic violence – appears to be increasing.

Research Methodology

This study was conducted through the lens of both an international aid worker and an academic. Research in Afghanistan incorporates firsthand sources as well as documents, articles, and reports collected since 2002. Much of the data has been collected for a dissertation examining the effects of gender-focused international aid on women and men in post-conflict Afghanistan[2]. Data collection consisted of interviews, questionnaires, and focus group discussions in Kabul with gender policymakers and practitioners[3]. The bulk of the data emerges from interviews with 71 Afghan women who are participants in development programs[4]. Further, 50 Afghan men were interviewed to collect their views on gender-focused interventions. All names have been withheld.

Contextualizing Violence Against Women in Afghanistan

Twenty-three years of social, economic, and political conflict has resulted in a vacuum where national and individual security should exist. Security is cited by the Afghan government - and both women and men - as the most pressing concern. For women, this entails a robust definition of security to include all aspects of human security - not just a life free of violence but also one where basic needs are met and fundamental rights are respected and safeguarded (UNDP and Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2004). In so-called post-conflict Afghanistan, reversions to violence are not unusual. In fact, conflicts are often circuitous in nature and violence – particularly violence against women – and

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[1] In this context, gender refers to women and men in their socially constructed roles. Gender roles vary between and within cultures – and between different types of men and women. Gender roles are socially constructed concepts, and are therefore dynamic. See (UNDP 2001) A change in gender roles might not necessarily instigate a change in gender *relations*.

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[3] Gender policymakers and practitioners are Afghan and expatriate women and men who are heads of international agencies, gender focal points, gender program implementers, heads of Afghan women's NGOs, and others.

[4] For this study, I use the term 'participants' to represent those who might be more commonly known as 'beneficiaries' of development programs. The designation 'beneficiary' is passive and falls short as it does not fully convey the depth and complexity of the relationship between actors.

may continue long after peace agreements have been signed. As a result of present insecurities, women's confidence and decision-making power remains weak. Analysts and experts have called for a remedy to the deteriorating security situation, particularly as it presents the most significant impediment to women's full exercise of their human rights (United Nations Economic and Social Council 2004). Despite these pleas, a culture of violence pervades, and women have increasingly less control of their lives.

A Brief History Lesson

In order to best understand the situation of women in Afghanistan today, one must begin with a little history lesson. An analysis of Afghan history demonstrates that women's rights have always been highly politicized, and that gender politics, as much as geo-politics, has provided the impetus for conflicts. It is said that *zan wa zameen*, women and land, have been the cause of conflict for centuries in Afghanistan (Johnson and Leslie 2004). In fact, "Afghanistan may be the only country in the world where during the last century kings and politicians have been made and undone by struggles relating to women's status" (Johnson and Leslie 2004). Afghan women's history is much more complex than existing formulations of pre- and post-Taliban. Only a thorough and gender-sensitive analysis of history can reveal the extent to which women's rights have been and continue to be highly politicized.

It might appear to be beyond these purposes to elaborate on Afghan women's history. However, this history repeatedly demonstrates that revolutionary change, state-building, and women's rights operate hand-in-hand (Moghadam 1994). These lessons document the repeated ebb and flow in women's rights in Afghanistan, and the highly politicized nature of these fluctuations. Attempts at modernization have been made in several critical stages throughout modern Afghan history[5]. Each time, these modernizations carried the *perception*[6] that reforms were imported and artificially imposed. And each time these reforms were met with strong resistance, particularly the measures relating to women's rights.

In the 1880s, ruler Amir Abd al-Rahman Khan (and later his son Amir Habibullah) launched one of the earliest attempts at emancipation and social reform in the Muslim world. Women's emancipation thus began to play a prominent role in the nationalist ideology of modernization (Hans 2004). During the 1920s, King Amanullah sought to drastically transform gender relations by enforcing Western norms for women[7], which were in turn met with violent opposition and swiftly replaced by more conservative measures. King Nadir Shah's brief reign saw the closing of girls' schools, and the revival of veiling and segregation. Similar attempts were made with rulers that followed, and

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[5] This section on Afghan Women's History has been adapted from Abirafeh's previous report: (Abirafeh 2005) It can be found at http://www.fes.org.af/AFGHANISTAN0905ABIRAFEHGENDER.pdf
[6] I emphasize 'perception' here as it is crucial to understand how Afghans *perceived* the modernizations. This often has more sway over the people than the actual goal of the modernizations.
[7] Amanullah was influenced and inspired by Western notions of modernity and progress. He sought to model Afghanistan after Western nations and saw the liberation of women as integral to this agenda. Examples of Amanullah's enfoced emancipation include abolition of the veil and *purdah* (seclusion of women).

these were further resisted. Each time social change was enforced, it was met with strong opposition from conservative forces. Despite incremental changes, women's rights vacillated between enforced modernization and conservative backlash. Afghan women once again found themselves at the center of a conflict between Western concepts of modernization and Afghan codes of culture, following the Saur (April) Revolution of 1978 and its program for social change (Hans 2004). Opposition to Soviet occupation-enforced reforms for women fueled the fundamentalist movement that took hold in refugee camps. This in turn served as the grounds for the Mujaheddin opposition to expel the Soviets and regain control both of women and Afghanistan[8].

Despite these vacillations, the aid community and the Western media's attention only turned to Afghanistan – and Afghan women - as a result of the Taliban. The Taliban's crimes against women are well known, yet Afghan women suffered under all the regimes in Afghanistan. In present-day Afghanistan, the country enjoys a democratically elected government and relative stability (mostly confined to Kabul). In this period of alleged liberation of Afghanistan – and of Afghan women - history repeats itself. Afghan women face another period of imported and imposed social change. However, as Afghan history has aptly demonstrated, a backlash inevitably follows.

Afghan Women Today

Afghanistan aspires to become a state that is pluralistic, Islamic, prosperous, and peace-loving (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2006). But the challenges are great. Afghanistan has some of the worst social indicators in the world, particularly for women. Afghan women have a life expectancy of 44 years. In their lifetime, they face staggering obstacles such as the highest maternal mortality rate in the world and almost 90% illiteracy (Afghanistan National Human Development Report 2004). Many analysts and activists note that women remain oppressed in Afghanistan, despite the oft-cited rhetoric of liberation of Afghan women. It has been said repeatedly that women are not yet able to enjoy their human rights. "Discriminatory practices institutionalized prior to and during the war have not disappeared and in some ways have grown stronger. The insecure environment exacerbates this further" (Amnesty International 2005). Amnesty International elaborates that the violence suffered during the years of conflict under various regimes was an extreme manifestation of the discrimination and abuses they suffered before the conflict began, as well as the unequal power relations between Afghan men and women (Amnesty International 2005). Violence against women in Afghanistan must first be viewed as part of a larger landscape that has been shaped by Afghan history.

In a speech to the Ministry of Defense, Deputy Minister of Women's Affairs Mazari Safa explained that women still suffer from deprivation and oppression, even several years after the conflict has ended. She explained that women are still abused, prevented from accessing education and economic opportunities, and unable to participate in public life. Afghan women today are still battered in the home, harassed in public places, married off without their consent, and traded and exchanged to resolve disputes (Safa 2005, 13

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[8] The Mujaheddin period is known for its violence towards women in the form of rapes, abductions, and restrictions on mobility.

September). This belief is reinforced by the Report of the UN Secretary General on The Situation of Women and Girls in Afghanistan (2004) which states that "the volatile security situation and traditional social and cultural norms continue to limit women's and girls' role in public life and deny them the full enjoyment of their rights" (United Nations Economic and Social Council 2004).

Violence Against Women: Data and Assumptions

The greatest challenge in doing research on violence against women is in accessing information. Available information in Afghanistan is based largely on anecdotal evidence. Data is not yet widely available. In the few cases where figures are available, these may in fact under-estimate reality.

In Afghanistan, many refuse to acknowledge violence against women as an issue. In addition, women – and men - have different definitions of what constitutes violence. Violence against women in the context of intimacy is often not recognized and labeled as such. Domestic violence is viewed by women as being within the realm of normal gender relations and not assumed to be an abuse of women's human rights. In fact, Amnesty International reports a general perception among women that violence was to be expected in their lives (Amnesty International 2005). Women who recognize violence against them are still not likely to change or address it. Such women recognize the added challenge this presents to gender relations, which could in turn provoke additional violence.

Women may be reluctant to speak publicly about the violence they have feared, witnessed, or experienced for fear of being stigmatized. In addition, there is a perception that violence against women in the domestic sphere is a private affair that should be addressed within families and not revealed to outsiders. The concern is that such public admissions will bring shame to the family. Violence against women is often disguised and denied within the family to retain honor and standing within the community. It is difficult to measure rates of violence accurately, particularly when there is a social stigma attached.

In addition to the fear of social stigma and the blame they may receive, women are reluctant to report violence because existing institutions are not equipped to take action and protect them. Reporting the crime may place the woman at greater risk. The crime itself may not be recorded or classified as a crime by the institution. In Afghanistan, women's complaints are often disregarded. Amnesty International reports that "complaints from victims of domestic violence are widely dismissed by the police as a private matter and victims are often advised, and sometimes pressured into returning to their abusive spouses and family" (Amnesty International 2005). Thus, women run the risk of exposing themselves to additional violence from the community, the institutions, and the state.

There have been cases where reported statistics drastically increase in a given time. It is important not to make the assumption that rates of violence have necessarily increased. There might be other factors that contribute to the sudden change. Perhaps reporting procedures have become less arduous. Perhaps women are part of an organization or

support group that is encouraging them to speak out. It is precisely these trends that make reporting on violence even more challenging. Statistics are unreliable, and quantitative data will be difficult to obtain. But this effort requires more than just figures and statistics. Structural issues need to be identified and addressed. Patterns of abuse and discrimination need to be revealed and studied. And root causes of violence in Afghan society must be understood.

The collection of information on violence is essential for overcoming silence and taboos that surround violence against women. Government statistics play an important role, but development and human rights organizations can accumulate data – particularly of the qualitative nature – to be used to raise awareness and inspire action. In early 2006, UNIFEM began a nation-wide effort to collect data for a comprehensive database on violence against women in order to analyze trends, determine strategies for action, and provide response mechanisms and services[9].

Finally, it is worth briefly stating the obvious. Not all women are victims. Not all men are perpetrators. Not all women are inherently peaceful. And not all men are bellicose. It is important to recognize that not all violence against women is at the hands of men. There are various examples across cultures and histories to demonstrate that women have the capacity for violence against each other. This ranges from female genital cutting – where young girls are mutilated by the hands of older women – to the violence perpetrated on a new bride by her mother-in-law. While it is important to acknowledge such incidents, it is clear that in the majority of cases, women are primarily victims of violence perpetrated by men. In Afghanistan, new brides can face abuse from their female in-laws, particularly if the marriage is the result of *Bad* (giving a female relative to the victim's family to settle a crime) or *Badal* (giving a female relative in marriage in return for a bride). If the bride remains childless, violence can also result. The forms of such violence perpetrated by women often entails abuse of power and could lead to psychological and physical abuse.

Forms and Patterns of Violence

There is a nascent understanding that particular forms of violence against women – particularly domestic violence – increase after a conflict. In Afghanistan today, it is not unusual to hear women say that they felt 'safer' under the Taliban[10]. Analyses of this phenomenon indicate that the continued availability of weapons, violence that male family members have experienced or meted out, trauma, frustration, and inability to access trainings and economic opportunities have contributed to the increase in domestic violence in recent years[11]. Further, in conflict and post-conflict contexts, gender roles are changing and gender relations may be renegotiated as a result. The space created for women may bring resentment and backlash, driving violence further into the private domain.

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[9] www.unifem.org/news_events/story_detail.php?StoryID=412
[10] Corrin and others reinforce this view. See (Corrin 2004)
[11] Afghanistan is not unique in this case. Most of the reports of increased violence against women in post-conflict context emerged from Bosnia.

Afghanistan's Millennium Development Goals Report for 2005 states that "violence against women is pervasive, a silent epidemic due to the low status of women, and compounded by long exposure to hostilities and conflict. It is a major obstacle to achieving gender equality and needs to be overcome through multiple efforts, including the rule of law, awareness creation, and gradually changing cultural practices and mindsets. Above all it requires political commitment and leadership at the highest levels to take actions that will concretely improve the rights of women" (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2005).

Violence against women is believed to be pervasive in Afghanistan, although little data exists to support this. The Ministry of Women's Affairs has called violence against women in Afghanistan a violation of human rights and an abuse that is sustained by a patriarchy that supports abuse and dehumanization of women. Violence against women also has significant economic and social costs, impairing women from actively and effectively participating in society and in their own – and ultimately Afghanistan's – development.

Forms of Violence

Violence against women in Afghanistan is widespread and ranges from deprivation of education to economic opportunities, through verbal and psychological violence, beatings, sexual violence and killings. Many acts of violence involve traditional practices including the betrothal of young girls in infancy, early marriage and crimes of "honor", where a female is punished for having offended custom, tradition or honor (Amnesty International 2005). Afghanistan's National Development Strategy – the government's overarching strategy for promoting growth, generating wealth and reducing poverty and vulnerability[12] – also sees widespread inequalities for women. The Constitution of Afghanistan guarantees gender equality, however women lack legal awareness and many do not effectively enjoy the constitutionally guaranteed equal protection of the law. It also states that "violence against women is pervasive; it includes forced marriage, child marriage, trafficking, immolation and physical violence. Inheritance and property laws leave widows or divorced women vulnerable. Discriminatory provisions in laws and policies are still prevalent and have not been made consistent with the constitution" (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2006).

According to Afghan tradition, females in the family are under the authority of the father or husband. They suffer restricted freedom of movement and nearly no control over the choices that govern their lives. Most women will not have the opportunity to assert economic and social independence, nor to enjoy their human rights. Girls are not given say over choice of husbands and find that they are abused and mistreated in the husband's home. Those who try to escape the abuse are stigmatized, isolated, and possibly imprisoned.

Forms of violence against women in Afghanistan include *Bad* and *Badal* (as previously mentioned), along with the practice of exchanging girls for cattle or material goods, and

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[12] http://www.af/nds/#1

the recently well-publicized self-immolation, which entails women inflicting harm upon themselves to end their suffering. Amnesty International reports that the majority of self-immolation victims they interviewed had attempted to kill themselves as a result of violence in the family (Amnesty International 2005). This phenomenon has been studied and publicized in Herat and is prevalent all over Afghanistan. In fact, the common perception that self-immolation occurs with greater frequency in Herat is simply because that is where most journalists chose to look.

Forced and underage marriages are also prevalent. Although there is Afghan legislation in place to prevent child marriages, it is not applied in practice, and girls are married off as early as age 8. Reports indicate that approximately 60-80% of all marriages are forced, and occur frequently as payment for debt or to settle a feud (Ministry of Women's Affairs 2005). According to Amnesty International, a child marriage is by definition a forced marriage, "as a child cannot be considered to have consented freely" (Amnesty International 2005). The selling and trafficking of women is increasing. New forms of violence are emerging as a result of women's increased visibility outside the home. Such violence is beyond social, ethnic, religious, tribal, or economic boundaries. Activists and experts have expressed concern that domestic violence is widespread, and there remains little public awareness, prevention, or response. Cases are not reported, and in the rare cases where they are reported, they are not properly recorded. The Ministry of Women's Affairs Legal Department recorded 583 reported cases in 2004, and it is likely that many more cases remain unreported (Ministry of Women's Affairs 2005). Violence against women and the absence of effective redress for victims, whether through informal or formal justice mechanisms, is a pervasive human rights problem in Afghanistan (Ministry of Women's Affairs 2005).

Other Countries and Cases

Examples from other countries emerging from conflict seem to demonstrate that increased domestic violence forms an unfortunate component of the post-conflict agenda. "In virtually all post-conflict settings, [domestic violence] is acknowledged as a component of the "culture of violence" that ensues from war" (Ward 2002). The Secretary-General's report on women, peace and security states that domestic violence is one particular form that continues after the conflict[13]. The experience of women in Bosnia is an oft-cited case to demonstrate the trend of increased violence against women in post-conflict contexts. Violence was inflicted upon Bosnian women at the hands of demobilized soldiers in the form of domestic violence. Similarly in Rwanda, women experienced increased violence following the conflict and became "soft" outlets for men's frustrations. Tanzanian women in refugee camps also were targets of various forms of violence.

Human Rights Watch reports that during the reconstruction process in post-conflict societies, violence against women is often ignored or relegated to low-priority status compared with other concerns (Human Rights Watch 1999). In these situations, cases of domestic violence have also largely gone unreported, and the figures available may be far

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[13] UN S/2002/1154

lower than the actual prevalence of violence. In Kosova, similar to Afghanistan, violence against women has only recently been made illegal, therefore certain types of violence can remain unrecognized or culturally accepted (Corrin 2004).

Speaking to Women and Men in Afghanistan

In 2005, the author published the first component of her dissertation research in the form of a report summarizing the outcomes of interviews with gender policy-makers and practitioners in Afghanistan. This report is a first step for the author in advancing this discussion and exploring the possible linkages between gender-focused aid and increased domestic violence. The outcome of this research should not be viewed as an argument against aid focused on women. It simply serves to advocate a contextualized approach to aid programming and the integration of men in gender programs.

Opportunities for Women

Interviews[14] conducted with 121 Afghan women and men reveal a discontentment with the operations of international organizations, and a sense that the social order has been disrupted in ways that have negative effects for women. Men recognize that they are not necessarily a focus of attention, and that the economic survival of the family depends on the woman as she is offered greater opportunities. Women have noted that men are increasingly becoming angry and impatient as they continue to be denied the traditional role of provider in the family, and as a result are becoming more violent at home. Of 121 interviews, over 30% mentioned violence as an increasing concern. Many others mentioned tension and increased sentiments of frustration or dissatisfaction.

A 20-year old woman explained that "organizations provide opportunities only for women… so the women have to step out of the house in order for the family to survive". A woman in her late 20s elaborated: "Women are allowed to work. Actually, there are *opportunities* for work. *Allowing* women to work is up to the husband. But if he cannot find work, he has no choice but to let his wife work".

Almost all the men noted that women were prioritized in aid and development programs. Men expressed that they were offered very little, therefore they had no choice but to rely on their women to access training and economic opportunities, and to share them with the rest of the family. Men expressed concerns that international organizations were encouraging the women to speak out against their husbands and deliberately disrupting the household hierarchy. They also noted that they were promised dramatic life changes based on oft-cited rhetoric promising 'liberation' and 'empowerment', but none of this has materialized. Expectations were raised, and commitments were not delivered. Many men also felt that international organizations promoted change that was contrary to Islam. One man believed that international organizations are "unveiling our women". Another man explained that "in the area of importing or bringing foreign culture and tradition, international organizations have bad effect on afghan women". A man in his late 20s

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[14] All quotations are taken directly from the author's personal research and interviews with Afghan men and women.

from Kabul elaborated that "sometimes [international organizations] are pushing hard for change that is fast and big, and it is not sensible".

Are Men Included?

Women expressed concern that the lack of support for men has made men increasingly angry. Many women explained that they would prefer that their husbands were given equal opportunities to participate in development programs and elaborated that their lives would be easier as a result. Some women noted an increased gap between men and women, and many women mentioned increased levels of violence as outcomes of this frustration. One woman explained: "my husband says that they make men angry when they do nothing for them and only offer opportunities to women. He is a teacher so he understands how people think about these things". Another elaborated that "men have become sensitive about women's organizations. They believe that these organizations train women to stand against the laws and their husbands. Of course this is not true, but it is actually what men think". This reinforces the importance of *perception* over reality. Another woman explained that men are becoming "more aggressive and angry to women because organizations do not give them any attention". And yet another woman reiterated the same point: "men are angry with international organizations because they only care about women. Men feel that they have dark futures".

"Most men are not very satisfied with the organizations", a man explained. "They feel that these organizations are interfering in family issues". Another man felt that "organizations are creating distance between men and women by encouraging women negatively". Many men expressed concern with the influence international organizations have had on Afghan culture. They felt that the organizations deliberately sought to enforce Western codes of culture as superior to Afghan ways. "International organizations inspired foreign culture on our men. They represented Afghan men incorrectly. And also they brought down their role in the family and society, so it caused difficulties and violences between men and women", one man explained. Again, many men reiterated the notion that international organizations were stripping men of their rights and giving them to women. This belief reinforces the view that the concept of rights is a zero sum game and that more rights for women leaves men without any rights at all.

Possible Theories and Rationale

Gender Roles in Conflict

Can women regain their pre-conflict rights – or perhaps acquire new rights – in post-conflict? Does conflict represent an opportunity to challenge the existing social framework, and does post-conflict present an occasion to restructure the status quo and reshape gender roles? Debate exists as to whether women gain in war through their increased access to traditionally-male spheres. Conflict compels individuals, households, and communities to fundamentally rethink and restructure their ways and beliefs. A part of this restructuring is played out on gender roles, and subsequently on gender relations.

Many theorists have argued that any expansion of women's roles in war is only temporary and fails to sustain itself when the war ends. Despite new roles, opportunities, and responsibilities, women may easily be marginalized in the reconstruction process. "Domestic violence and the fear of it are often key factors in limiting women's participation in development projects" (Pickup, Williams, and Sweetman 2001). In fact, women are well aware that their active involvement in development projects may present challenges to men's roles. There may be tensions if women's newly-assumed roles are not viewed in line with traditional social structures. This backlash could return women to their pre-war roles, or perhaps leave women worse off than they were before the war. It is not unusual to witness a return to, or even an increase in, patriarchal control over women (Pickup, Williams, and Sweetman 2001).

Aid Programming and Policy Implications

Could development aid have something to do with it?

Development, particularly in the aftermath of conflict, is often conflated with radical social change. However, development efforts generally do not set out to challenge gender power relations[15]. These efforts run the risk of doing a disservice to women by implementing programs and policies that have not taken all possible repercussions into account. Development interventions aiming to empower women may in fact place women at increased risk. This is particularly relevant in the case of Afghanistan, where the rhetoric used to justify development intervention stemmed from the language used to justify the ousting of the Taliban. And yet, nearly five years later, one could argue that Afghan women are neither 'liberated' nor 'empowered'.

Interventions that raise expectations of empowerment encourage women to step outside pre-existing gender roles. In so doing, gender and power relations are challenged. Women face greater risk if the environment for social change is seen to be an external imposition. Amnesty International notes the "cautious and precarious atmosphere under which the issue of advancing women's rights is currently debated" (Amnesty International 2005). Women may suffer further when gender-focused interventions fail to take gender issues into account, focusing only on women. As seen from the research presented above, men's perceptions that they are neglected could result in a backlash for women. Social change and transformation are not simply introduced by development interventions, but are longer-term processes operating at a structural level to address gender inequalities - on women's own terms. Such processes are contextual and local, raising doubts as to whether an international aid-imposed social change agenda is really the right approach (Abirafeh 2005).

What does this mean in Afghanistan?

Afghan women felt that they were not sufficiently consulted on the direction and pace of social change. This demonstrates a denial of women's agency and of their ability to act on their own behalf and achieve gains. Theorists have elaborated on this point, arguing

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[15] For further information, see (Abirafeh 2005)

that "the possibility of violent backlash against [women] further confirms the importance of development interventions being designed in partnership with the women they are intended to benefit. Empowerment cannot be given, but must be generated by the women it is meant to serve" (Pickup, Williams, and Sweetman 2001).

It is crucial to support and advocate a contextualized approach that recognizes Afghan history and Afghan pace and patterns of social change. To this end, interventions must aim to understand the concept of 'gender' and 'empowerment' in the local context and the construction of gender roles and relations. This entails congruence with Islam and other social frameworks within which Afghans choose to operate.

Development programs that do not take gender dimensions into account may be exacerbating violence against women. It is possible to emphasize women's centrality to post-conflict reconstruction and development programs without marginalizing men. Working with men in gender programming as participants and as advocates and supporters could help change male perceptions of women and help to overcome traditional practices which restrict women's rights. This is integral to combating violence against women (Amnesty International 2005).

Interventions should be cognizant of the images used and the resulting perceptions that emerge. The perception of an imposed Western agenda coupled with the image of Afghan women as downtrodden creatures beneath bourkas[16] does little to advance the cause of Afghan women, particularly in the context of the Western world's current climate of fear/fascination with women in Islam. Women's rights activists advise caution in order to avoid backlash from the conservative elements of Afghan society. An Afghan woman explained that "when society is ready [for changes]... the women will ask [for] it by themselves" (Amnesty International 2005).

What Next?

While the above presents theories and perspectives, the important lesson to draw from this is that well-intended efforts and interventions may in fact produce unexpected outcomes for women. Violence against women is not exclusive to Afghanistan, to developing countries, or to conflict and post-conflict countries. It is an epidemic that affects women worldwide and knows no social, cultural, or religious boundaries. It would do a great disservice to women in Afghanistan to isolate their suffering and label it an Afghan phenomenon. This research reveals that a more profound understanding of gender roles and relations in post-conflict contexts is needed. This entails further research into externalities of development interventions and work on men and masculinity as entry points.

Images of Afghan Women and Men

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[16] The bourka is a full-body form of covering traditionally worn by Pashtun women in Afghanistan to mark the symbolic segregation between men's and women's spheres. Amongst non-Afghans, it is more commonly known as *bourka*. However, *bourka* is the Arabic/Urdu term, while Afghans use the Dari/Persian term *chaddari*.

It seems appropriate, in this context, to conclude with the voices of Afghan women and men. The author found that both women and men were concerned with the image the world had of them – an image that was largely used to justify intervention. The repeated themes included a concern that aid programs artificially separated women and men – even in cases where they wanted to work together to rebuild the country. Further, there is an overarching perception that aid programs seek to 'change' what is Afghan culture. Both women and men were concerned that men were constructed as the enemy, and women were victims needing to be saved by those outside. An Afghan woman explained: "the world thinks that Afghan women need their help and they need to be saved from Afghan men". Afghan men elaborated that "most people in other countries believe that Afghan men are the ones who have taken the women's rights from them".

Both Afghan women and men noted that the bourka served as the image under which all others were determined. Afghan women repeatedly expressed exasperation with this facile construct, saying that the world thinks "Afghan women are only bourkas". As a result of this image, the world felt compelled to 'save' them. The theme of denied agency was also reiterated. An Afghan woman explained that the world thinks of them as oppressed and weak. This is not accurate, she said, "but the world wants to see us this way". An Afghan man elaborated strongly that the international community wants Afghan men and women to have "freedom like the Western world. Western women wear clothes, not bourka. So Afghan women should wear that too, otherwise they have no rights. This is a completely incorrect image. We don't approve of it. Afghan men and women are Muslims and have their own culture, and they do what is in their culture".

An Afghan man stated that the world must have had a bad image of Afghanistan, or their freedoms would not be under foreign control. A woman elaborated: "I do not think the image was good. If it was good, we would not have so many foreigners coming to say they are helping us". Despite this, many women are happy with the international community's support, but also felt that they would like to direct the changes. A young Afghan man explained it best: "The world thought they could bring freedom to Afghan women [but] freedom is only won from inside".

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