

The Role of Afghan Women in the Reconstruction of Afghanistan

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Abstract

The war has torn the country and fragmented the society causing immense challenges in the efforts to rebuild Afghanistan. Women suffered the most as a result of the wars and under the Taliban regime, making them incapable and leading them to struggle and stand on by their own feet. Under the direct control of Taliban rule rights of women were totally wiped out. This curbs their strength in rebuilding the country. However, Afghan women are gradually regaining their rights after a long period of suppression. The country is also on the way to physical and ideological reconstruction with significant help from the donor countries and international agencies after heavy destructions by unending wars and conflicts. The war against international terrorism, which toppled the Taliban in Afghanistan, benefited women to some extent. It was followed by the Bonn agreement, which laid down the foundation for Interim Administration of Afghanistan and subsequently opened the door for women to participate in public affairs. In fact, the creation of Ministry of Women's Affairs is a major boost to women, their development and participation in the reconstruction in Afghanistan.

Keywords: Afghan, Taliban, Bonn-Accord, International, Reconstruction,

Introduction

In the immediate aftermath of the downfall of the Taliban regime, the attention of the international communities turn more toward development and reconstruction rather than military expedition. The international communities had opportunity to come to the aid of women and girls after the formation of interim administration of Afghanistan. Various organizations and agencies from different countries came to Afghanistan with humanitarian help. Several programmes and policies with financial grand came in Afghanistan. Knowing illiteracy among women as an obstacle, the USAID established training centre to impart education and vocational courses for women and girls, and set up income generation projects. Afghan Women's Network set up and funded by USAID, contributed a lot in providing managerial training, skilled jobs for refugees and training for political participation. The Agency for Technical Cooperation and Development (ACTED) with the French humanitarian organization established women centre on the Shomali plains, providing education and training for women. It mainly trains Afghan women for income generating projects like making cloths and quilts, etc.

Insecurity in Afghanistan is also looked into by many international organizations and provided several measures to solve it. The UN Security Council passed the resolution 1563 in September 2004 that expanded the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. Thus, established Provincial Reconstructions Teams (PRTs) were deployed in all the major provincial cities (Amnesty International Reports 2005: 11). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Afghan New Beginning Programme was introduced to disarm the militias. No matter what their motives were, the need of the benefit to reach the needy people, particularly to women and girls, are more important matters today.

1. Women in reconstruction as secured by Bonn accord

Afghanistan Bonn accord (BA) of 2001, held in Germany gave equal importance for the respect of the human rights along with national reconciliation, peace and stability of the country. The rights of the Afghan people, men, women and children provided without discrimination base on community and religion. The Bonn agreement was a first step for the Afghan people to decide their political future through the people broad-based, gender-sensitive, multi-ethnic representation (Bonn Agreement 2001). It set up the interim administration composed of a chairman, five vice chairmen and 24 members and the selection of its women members were given due regard. With the good will pressure of United Nation, World Bank and other international organizations, the Bonn agreement women rights as one of the important issues that needs to be addressed.

The Bonn agreement entrusted the interim administration with the task of setting up of Special Independent Commission with the assistance of United Nation including human rights commission with the responsibility of monitoring Human rights and investigation of violation of human rights. It is also authorised to develop domestic human rights institutions. The special independent commission for convincing the Loya Jirga was given special attention for significant number of women in the representation in the emergency Loya Jirga.

The Bonn agreements enforced the international laws and human rights convention and also re-established Afghanistan's 1964 constitution (Bonn Agreement 2001). The Afghan 1964 Constitution provided equal rights to all Afghan people with special provision where women were given right to vote, serve in government as officials, and be elected to parliament. As a result of the agreement Dr. Sima Samar, woman candidate was appointed as the Minister of Women's Affairs and Minister of Health was given to other woman candidate Suhaila Seddigi out of total 29 ministerial positions in the Afghan Interim Authority (AIA). With two women members, the president Hamid Karzai signed declaration of the essential rights of Afghan Women on January 12, 2002 (Masuda Sultan 2005: 7). Later in 2003, the Interim Administration for Afghanistan under the leadership of President Hamid Karzai signed and ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

2. International assistance and Afghan Women in reconstruction

In spite of the isolation and opposition to Taliban rule prior to the present government, United Nations and other humanitarian agencies especially from western countries have concerns and attempted to solve the humanitarian crisis with Aid and Development Programmes. No doubt, with all the inconveniences in co-ordination and enforcing Aids and Development Programmes under the Taliban rule, there were beneficiary to needy in short-term lives saving assistances. Yet, there were many problems in humanitarian assistance. After the downfall of Taliban regime the humanitarian actors from International Organisations and from different countries have better access in much number to Afghanistan. The problems of co-ordination among the humanitarian actors and government of Afghanistan and other difficulties in delivering aids to the needy remained more or less unchanged. Apart from the complex problems of the social, political and economy issues, the warlords and armed groups of Afghanistan made the humanitarian actors difficult to perform their duties.

3. Non-governmental Organizations and Afghan women

Non-government Organizations also plays important role for Afghan women. They have been working and investing for women programme to support women's Health, education, community process, and income generation. NGOs employed large number of women staff creating women employment. NGO introduce microfinance, small business development, human rights education, legal advice and literacy, advocacy, and protection of women and girls. They also help women in participation in politics and public affairs.

There are some NGOs, whose main focus is on women of Afghanistan, such as Afghan Women's Mission (USA), Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan, Afghan Women's Network, Afghan Gender Cafe, Afghanistan Women Council, Canadian Women for Women in Afghanistan, Feminist Majority Foundation (USA), Global Fund for Women (USA), Medica Mondiale (Germany), Refugee Women in Development (USA), Womankind Worldwide (UK), Women for Afghan Women (USA), FemAid (France), Women for Women International (USA), Humanitarian Assistance for the Women and Children of Afghanistan, PARWAZ, Voice of Women Organization, Shuhada, Women's Alliance for Peace and Human Rights in Afghanistan (USA). Agency Coordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR), the Afghanistan umbrella Organization of national and international organization form in 1988 coordinated, plan strategy collect and disseminate information etc. of NGOs in Afghanistan for its efficiency. ACBAR is the largest network of international and national NGOs with its own NGO Gender Advocacy Group and has also nominated a representative from international and a national women's NGO as members of the MoWA (The World Bank 2005).

Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), political and social organization of Afghan women has been fighting for human rights and social justices since its formation on 1987. Its objective was to increase numbers of women in political, public activities and to acquire women rights with the establishment of secular and democratic government. The Afghan women's Mission is USA an NGO who

works for women education, health and other programme has close link with RAWA. Afghan Women's Network (AWN), the Non-partisan network of women and women NGO has been working to empower women and ensure women participation in society. The members foster partnership and collaborate among themselves and contribute through advocacy, lobbying, networking, training, and capacity building women participation and women empowerment. The Afghan Gender Cafe form networking, advocacy, activism, announcements, news and interaction about women on an online. It creates a kind of platform where women share ideas and information, and to ask for assistance. Afghanistan Women Council (AWC) with main object to enlighten women improves their living conditions, and to strengthen their socio-economic status in society has not only been involved in providing education, health care, manage humanitarian relief but also given efforts and mobilised women to peace and stability to the country (Afghanistan Women Council 2009). AWC introduced projects for women trade training, literacy, health kit disbursement and strive to provide voices for women through political representation.

Negative aspects of NGOs in Afghanistan are that, since they are functioning with more autonomy, many NGOs tends to go in the direction of the donor country is interest or influence by the Local commanders rather than to the need of the peoples. There are occasions where NGOs were often required to endow to the desires of local commanders, to build support within their patronage network (Alexander Their and Jarat Chopra 2002: 899). Such operation leads to draw into communal factions lead to unwanted consequences. Lack of accountability and wide spread prevented NGO corruption made people lack of trust in them. Some of the NGOs remain in name with no proper or without functioning. The security problems in many part of Afghanistan is huge obstacle for NGOs to reach Afghan women and to the need people. NGOs Aid workers particularly women staffs were often targeted. Many NGOs has been closed down by the lack of security in many part of the country.

4. Afghan Women in the Reconstruction

After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, Afghan citizens, as well as the international community, viewed the transformation of women's roles as a crucial part of the reconstruction process. The establishment of an Interim Administration for Afghanistan, the creation of a Ministry of Women's Affairs, and donor assistance to programs targeting women provided women a chance to reclaim roles in public life and become active in their country's development. However, there are difficulties in integrating women and women's issues into institutional policymaking and regional tendencies to slip back into repressive policies against women present under the Taliban. The 2001 Bonn Agreement, which created the Ministry of Women's Affairs, laid out guidelines for women's roles in Afghan society. The agreement pledged to include women in policymaking by giving them roles in the Loya Jirga and Interim Administration. Donor nations also pledged that women's rights would be addressed during the rebuilding of national institutions and government. Despite progress in women's inclusion in reconstruction, barriers to the restoration of women's participation in civil society continued to exist both at the national and regional levels. At the national level, both the Interim Administration and UN-sponsored conference on reconstruction were male-dominated and the Ministry of Women's Affairs has suffered from a lack of funding and minimal support from senior officials (ICG Asia Report 2003). At the regional level, some warlords reinstated repressive Taliban policies such as restrictions on educational opportunities for women and girls. In addition, physical security for women throughout the country remains an important issue, as the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) is present only in Kabul.

5. Afghan women in the Political Participation

Afghanistan has enshrined gender equality in the Constitution (Article 22) to ensure that women have a minimum representation of 25% in the National Assembly (Articles 83 and 84). The Government has provided significant leadership roles for women, including the appointment of three women ministers, 14% women representatives in the first *Loya Jirga*, and women's participation in the constitutional drafting commission, the Judicial Commission, and the Electoral Commission. The Constitutional *Loya Jirga* in December 2003 provided for equality between women and men before the law, and allocated to women, on average, two seats per province in the Lower House and half of the one-third members of the Upper House, to be appointed by the President. This will secure for women a total minimum share in the National Assembly of at least 25%.

Women are already exercising their right to participate in local and national level politics, including through the National Solidarity Program (NSP) where women are at par with men to elect (and contest) members of the Community Development Councils. The NSP and the scheduled elections are two new mechanisms that constitute channels for women's participation in democratic governance. Although the voter registration was hampered by lack of security and resources (disproportionately affecting women), the percentage of female registration has been higher than expected in the previous general election. Women comprise 32% of the total number of voters registered for national elections though there is great regional variation such as In Kandahar, for instance, women comprised less than 10% of registered voters (UN Reports 2005). Regionally, Afghanistan has among the highest percentage of seats allocated for women in the national parliament. While encouraging in and of it, increased parliamentary representation will do little to increase women's overall political participation unless women can contribute to local-level decision-making. At present, women are poorly represented at the sub-national level and in local governance bodies.

The present context of under-development and economic hardship continues to present an opportunity for women in Afghanistan to redefine their roles in their own terms, while contributing to the rehabilitation of the nation. In order to do so women must be at the heart of development efforts in Afghanistan. The gender equality enshrined in the Afghanistan Constitution can only be realised in practice if the practical obstacles to women's participation in all aspects of Afghan society are addressed. Furthermore, the realisation of gender equality and women's empowerment is an essential pre-requisite to achieving lasting peace and sustainable development in Afghanistan. The fact that an unprecedented number of women were elected to parliament in the recent parliamentary and provincial council elections on the 18th of September must be celebrated. The fact that these women achieved this, in spite of intimidation and threats and in many cases won more votes than their male counterparts (Women and Public Policy Program 2004: 2).

6. Obstacle in the Afghan women reconstruction

In spite of the freedom, gender equality and reservations given by the new 2004 constitution and other International convention, Afghan women have inevitable obstacles on their way for public participation and reconstruction. Living in war, conflicts and under fundamental Taliban rule for more two decades have made Afghan women impossible all of a sudden to lead a normal way. There was no education for women, and were restricted of their movement and employment under the rule of Taliban. It is for sure that illiterate women economically dependent, with restricted movement and other public activities by social norm and fear led to insecurity and cannot perform well in any activities as women who lead normal life. Women in Afghanistan severely have limited freedom. All these restriction made women confined in their house and depend on the will of their husband. Though, the Taliban rule was replaced following the American War on terrorism, the system still prevails in many parts of the country. The other ugly aspect of Afghan women is the restriction of women by social norms and customary practices which was and is, without or with Taliban rule. The knowledge of politics and public participation is out of question for many women in Afghanistan. Afghan women in such conditions, without free participation in public space and dependent on husband, almost practically cannot contribute much to the reconstruction. "Afghan women suffered domestic and other types of violence for the past 25 years, not just under the Taliban regime" (UN Report 2002), and also till today Afghan women are suffering in different forms.

4.1 Women illiteracy

The major obstacle for women in reconstruction process is women illiteracy. Almost 90 percent of Afghanistan women were illiterate (Afghanistan National Human Development Report 2004). The programmes, policies and women rights enshrined in their constitution are like 'song for the deaf' or like 'dance for the blind'. Many women in Afghanistan are not aware of their rights given in the constitution and in the Islamic laws. Lack of education among women leads to other various problems such as health care, sanitation, problem in communications and political participation, etc. which in turn leads to inefficient in the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

4.2 Women Insecurity

One of the main obstacles to women participation in the reconstruction and development process and one of the severest threats to women rights are widespread violence against women in Afghanistan. In any part of the world, women are the worst sufferers in war or in deteriorating security situation, incapable law enforcing organs or absent of rule of law. Afghanistan without strong and legitimate state that control the whole country has several security flaws of especially in many provincial and rural areas. Insecurity within family and gender-based violence against women constitutes the most serious impediment to their participation in public life, and in the economic sphere, as well as the obvious damage to their physical and mental health. Forced and early marriages are the primary sources of this violence. The law-enforcement and judicial systems of Afghanistan offer no special protection to women affected by violence. Moreover a culture of impunity seems to exist with regard to such violence.

4.3 Afghan women restriction of movement

The Afghan traditional social and cultural norms and insecurity continue to limit women and girls to participate in public affairs (UNESCO 2004). The constant attacked of women by insurgent and armed militia also restricted their mobility. Afghan women being killed or disabled by fighting, land mines and war weapons also restricted their mobility in Afghanistan in recent years (Lambert, M-L, et al 1997: 315). Afghan women suffer from chronic untreated ailments, stress disorders and depression, through being confined lengthily in very tense situations that they could not act directly upon, especially if displaced from their normal residence (Gessner, BD 1994: 226). Cultural requirements seem to have a significant effect on access to community disability services, such as those provided by CDAPS' operating agencies. 'The presence of female rehabilitation workers has been found to profoundly affect the use of services by girls (M. Miles 2002: 947). Afghan women and girls have had a hugely disproportionate participation in providing the informal home care and assistance that has always been the major service resource in the country.

Afghan women human resource has been destroyed during the long years of war and armed conflict. At the same time majority of them are illiterate. Consequently, they are powerless and very few women have leadership qualities. They are mostly depending on male assistance and help in their home and outside. Hence, only few of the Afghan women could hold leadership positions. Among this few women leaders, there are some who stay outside Afghanistan. Besides the above mentioned obstacles, women live under the shadow of male-oriented culture, where subordination and oppression is an accepted norm (Dr. Massouda Jalal 2005), at any place. The burden of poverty is also another huge obstacle for women, since millions of women are widows and has responsibilities in the family. They are vulnerable to social violence and conflict in domestic as well as in public spaces. In such situations, Afghan women have limited role in reconstruction in post conflict Afghanistan.

Conclusion

With establishment of new government following the Emergency Loya Jirga and Bonn Agreements, and the introduction of the New 2004 constitution, Afghan women were given not only gender equality but innumerable positive provisions and reservations. The National and International government and Non-government contributed financial and services assistance specifically to the development of Afghan women. These assistances and provision enable women to stand and raised their own voice for their rights after long period suppression and domination by religious and social fundamental forces. Further the establishment of Ministry of Women's Affairs is a boast for Afghan women, their development and participation in the reconstruction.

However, the implementation of those provisions, policies and programme has limitation. There are no sufficient aids and measures taken for women in spite of all the promise made by the national and international communities. There is few Women's Resources Centre functioning in the country that extends the work of Minister of women Affair in the provinces with main objective of training women in political participation. The majority of Afghan women are illiterate and ignorant of their own rights even to protect themselves and raise their voice against the assault (Sameera Ayyubi 2003: 110). The restriction of women movement by the social norms, religious biases and insecurity due to wide spread violence were other major obstacles for women in reconstruction process. Afghan women human resource and their potential have been

destroyed during the long years of war and armed conflict. The only women who are educated and active in public affairs are mostly from Kabul or living abroad. As long as Afghan women are not economically self-sufficient and illiterate to know their rights, they will not be able even to protect their own rights. Beside freedom from political and social domination, Emancipation from poverty and illiteracy which is lacking in Afghan women today is must to enable them to participate in reconstruction in true sense.

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