



AN EVALUATION OF GENDER-FOCUSED AID INTERVENTION IN AFGHANISTAN: DOES IT PROMOTE GENDER EQUALITY OR REINFORCING HEIRARCHIES?

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Abstract

Although women empowerment has become a buzzword in the ‘international aid’ world for the last several years, policies asserting to encompass these frameworks have failed to bring about sustainable development, or improve the status of women in Afghanistan. Conversely, the insensitive interventions have often resulted in resentment and backlash among people. Researchers and practitioners have attributed this failure to lack of political commitment, ineffective implementation strategies, and absence of institutional support. These explanations remain unconvincing. The paper maintains that women empowerment and marginalization are linked to specific conditions that have deep rooted gendered patterns. It uses the capabilities approach as an analytic framework to comprehend how Afghan women view their place in an extremely patriarchal society.

Keywords: Women Empowerment; Afghanistan; Aid Intervention; Capabilities Approach

1. Introduction

Over the last decade, gender equality and women empowerment have been the focus of the international community’s development efforts in Afghanistan. Gender mainstreaming has also become a fundamental agenda in order to achieve the universal goal of gender equality (Dejaeghere & Lee, 2011). Aid intervention policies aspiring to target marginalized groups (women) often do so on the basis of demographic variables and by depoliticizing aid interventions. As a result, donor-assisted women empowerment interventions have largely failed to enhance the status of Afghan women. This paper argues that this approach to outlining marginality does not effectively tackle the fundamental discriminatory norms, values and practices that perpetuate inequalities. It uses capabilities approach as an analytic framework to understand Afghan women’s viewpoints and draws on results of a study and feminist viewpoints of ‘empowerment’ to indicate how gender discriminations are ingrained in the societal norms and values. The paper argues that empowerment and marginalization are associated with particular conditions that have deeply ingrained gendered patterns.

To establish the argument, the main body concentrates on explaining gender-focused aid intervention and evaluating its effectiveness for ‘empowering’ or ‘liberating’ women in Afghanistan. Accordingly, the first section makes a critical assessment of gender-focused aid intervention and its impact on the lives of Afghan women. The second section presents an analysis of empowerment and marginalization through a capabilities framework and presents the study method and results that was undertaken in six provinces of Afghanistan. The third part puts forward an evaluation of the utility of the capabilities approach for gender-focused aid intervention. The conclusion summarizes the main findings of the paper.

Aid Intervention and Women Empowerment—A Critical Perspective

Over the last few years, women empowerment has become an important agenda for international development community as they aim to achieve the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) on gender equality. The abuse of women's rights by Taliban regime was one justification that prompted the US-led invasion of Afghanistan (Icheke, 2011; Kabeer et al., 2011). Currently, Afghanistan presents a stark picture of human development condition, including: extreme poverty, an urban-biased and fragile state, and profound gender inequality (Riphenber, 2003). The problems are further exacerbated by the country's institutional structures, which constrain women's participation in economy and politics.

Since the fall of Taliban in 2001, there have been numerous waves of reform in the country, each meant to promote women's rights and gender awareness. Gender inequality in Afghanistan is generally framed by the international aid/development agencies as an issue of high levels of poverty, gender-based violence, and lack of access to economic resources, education and employment opportunities (Abirafeh, 2004; World Bank, 2005). The reforms introduced for the past many years encompass solutions that are focused on promoting women's rights, ensuring their equal access to education and employment, and targeting maternal and reproductive health. The proposed solutions can be categorized into two major frames: the MDG frame and an economic development frame.

Nevertheless, there is a general consensus among practitioners and researchers that the past attempts to improve women's status have made insignificant progress in Afghanistan. Critics argue that the main reason for the failure of past efforts was that they were driven from the top-down by international institutions and urban elites (Barakat & Wardell, 2002; Kandiyoti, 2007). Moreover, the primary advocates of women's rights, such as UNIFEM, the UNDP and other UN aid agencies have relied on extremely formal phrasing and legalistic verbiage in introducing 'gender awareness' concepts (Long, 2007). Not unexpectedly, given the inflexible and complex style of presentation, the discourses of women's rights and gender equality were not widely adopted by Afghans.

This paper argues that the application of gender awareness to aid intervention policy is confronted by the following challenges:

Conflation of 'gender' and 'women'

Afghanistan's path can be traced together with Walby's comprehension of the developments of gender and how they impact aid interventions. According to her, involvement of gender issues in aid interventions entails four phases. The first phase involves the reference of women as a footnote, which is followed by a phase that highlights the gaps from the previous negligence. The third stage entails women as a compensation for the previous fallacy or neglect. Lastly, the fourth phase embodies a thorough theoretical incorporation of gender evaluation (Walby, 2000). Afghanistan meets the third phase in its intervention approach. Walby (2000) explains that this approach puts forward women's activity as extraordinary, which limits its understanding of women activity as a divergence from the norm and confines gender evaluation/analysis to women. Moreover, this approach does not consider men as effective actors in gender politics and takes only women as gendered subjects. In her evaluation of gender-focused aid policies in Afghanistan, Abirafeh (2009, p. 24) argues, "gender has been conflated with women, and the language of aid programming has been oriented around women's objectives, without a broader understanding of gender." Therefore, this approach is unable to see women's secondary status in Afghan society as an outcome of social norms and practices that limit their ability to have control in shaping broader institutional arrangements that distinguish their society. Also, the approach's confined

perspective of women's activity as an aberration from the norm disguises the marginalization and inequalities that continue to exist beyond the urban cities.

Varied Assumptions about Women's Vulnerability

For international aid organizations, their proclaimed target for Afghan women was a radical social transformation and change in gender order (Zulfacar, 2006; Icheku, 2011; Kabeer et al., 2011). Nevertheless, the interventions were impeded by insufficient understandings of the intersection of gender, poverty and politics (Abirafeh, 2009). The *Afghan Women Empowerment Act*, which began in 2004, is an illustration of insensitive and nuanced discourses enlivening gender interventions in Afghanistan. The Act earmarked funds for the Afghanistan Human Rights Commission and the Ministry of Women's Affairs to address issues related to women empowerment and to ensure gender mainstreaming. However, the act could not generate an effective outcome and it became dormant after two years. Abirafeh (2009) criticizes the inability of the Act to acknowledge Afghan women's agency and its failure to assume that empowerment is not a top-down attempt—in this case the action had to come from the United States government. These assumptions led to difficulties in implementing empowerment. For instance, the aid policies in Afghanistan attempted to address 'empowerment' issues through technical interventions, stripping the term of its political meaning—further obscuring the social problems (Kabeer, 1994; Cornwall & Brock, 2005). It is rightfully argued that technical solutions on their own constrained the attempts of Afghan feminists promoting structural change in their own settings (Abirafeh, 2009).

Furthermore, the dominant perspective on aid discourse left little room for alternate (local) discourses on women (Hilhorst, 2003). The current discourse on Afghan women indicates that socio-cultural limitations restrict women's access to aid—implying that it is only about changing attitudes and values (Fergusson, 1994). Moreover, women have always been grouped alongside children as a 'vulnerable group' in aid intervention policies. Some critics highlight that such perspective displaces women, reinforces oppression, refutes agency, and restricts their role in their own empowerment (Abirafeh, 2009). Moreover, such language is not only disempowering, but also paternalistic (Debusscher, 2013). Last but not least, an approach that fails to incorporate human rights framework—that shows people as active right holders rather than passive recipients of policies (Barton, 2005)—serve to reinforce gender inequalities. Taking all this information into consideration, it can be argued that the aid apparatus has failed to acknowledge Afghan feminism and their ability to exercise agency.

Perception of Gender Equality as a 'Western' Imposition

Unlike Western capitalist settings, gender relations are complementary in Afghanistan. According to a World Bank report, gender has remained one of the most politicized issues in Afghanistan over the past century, and it speaks of complementarities not equality when it comes to gender roles (World Bank, 2005). Therefore, it is unwise to expect Muslim women to exhibit liberal attitudes especially with their socialization under the orthodox milieu of religion and culture (Mananaro & Alozie, 2011). The problems were further compounded by the interventions' "attempts to import an agenda of social change coupled with the lack of contextualized analysis that accompanied program design" (Abirafeh, 2009, p. 68). As a result, many Afghans consider women rights and gender equality frameworks as Western constructs, which are in contradiction with indigenous beliefs and values (World Bank, 2005). Not surprisingly, the local groups superficially recognized the 'gender awareness' component of the development/aid programs, whereas failing to internalize measures that ensure sustainable improvements for Afghan women.

Individualization of gender-inequality issues

When analyzing issues related to gender inequalities, the intervention policies in Afghanistan see women as the primary problem holders, whereas men and institutional structures are rarely problematized. The absence of men in such evaluations implies that women should bear the sole responsibility for solving issues related to gender inequalities (Debusscher, 2013). The current discourse implies that gender-inequality is a personal issue, rather than a public problem. Gusfield warns about the dangers of individualizing social issues because such an approach ignores the underlying institutional factors that cause these problems (Gusfield, 1989, as cited in Bacchi, 1999).

Sen's Capabilities Framework for Evaluating Empowerment and Gender Equality

Employing a theoretical framework in any policy sector/issue demands a robust comprehension of the framework ex-ante, and also the justification why it is the most pertinent choice for that specific problem. This section aims to address the aforementioned issues. On one hand, it highlights the main features of the capabilities approach and its significance. On the other hand, it evaluates its utility with regards to gender equality and empowerment. Consequently, this part of the paper sets the stage for the application of the framework to 'gender equality' issues in Afghanistan, which is carried out subsequently.

Understanding the Capabilities Framework

A capabilities framework underscores an individual's capacity to live the kind of life he/she values by his/her agency freedom to choose among different alternatives within his/her context and ability (Sen, 2009). Sen (1999) highlights that capabilities entail the choices that one values—which are not ends in themselves—and the way opportunities are used to acquire well-being, since opportunities can be substantiated differently for different individuals. Therefore, this paper argues that reaching a certain threshold of education or employment does not result in gender-equality, but rather, it is the social norms, values, and institutional structures that women identify as impacting their emancipation and empowerment. In order to extend the capabilities framework to gender issues, the paper includes some feminist perspectives on empowerment and gender equality. Similarly, Robeyns (2005) proposes that other frameworks should be used together with capabilities approach to assess certain social conditions that influence people differently.

Sen believes that individuals' choices to attain well-being are affected by four sets of personal and social circumstances, including: physical atmosphere, personal characteristics, social environment and relational viewpoints (Sen, 1999). Evaluating these conditions through a feminist perspective on empowerment, Kabeer (1999) discovered that these environments are not confined to material and institutional aspects, but they also encompass norms and values that perpetuate gender inequalities. Some critics also contend that the discourses on gender equality and empowerment should incorporate the concept of power and politics, which are important in establishing the boundaries of choices for different individuals (Kabeer, 1999; Abirafeh, 2009). Moreover, it is argued that an individual's agency to evaluate and make decisions as a woman is impacted by the structures, social norms and ideologies that surround gender relations (Kabeer, 1999; Maslak, 2008).

An important aspect of Sen's capabilities approach is the different perceptions of different individuals regarding opportunities for their welfare. The main purpose of this paper is to identify what Afghan women value about their empowerment, and what factors they believe can affect their well being in their empowerment. To this end, this paper aims to use the work of critical feminist scholars on empowerment and gender equality in Afghanistan.

All things considered, the capabilities approach remains one of the most influential theoretical elucidations for understanding the reasons that lead to marginalization and those that create opportunities for an individual to choose what she values for empowerment. In order to understand the social conditions that are critical to empowering women and promoting gender equality in Afghanistan, this paper explores the relevant literature.

The Study and Analysis

The data included here come from a ‘situation analysis’ of women conducted in six provinces of Afghanistan including Kabul. To understand the social perceptions of marginalization and empowerment, quantitative and qualitative data were gathered from women, various organizations’ staff and community members in these provinces. The social structures of the provinces vary depending on ethnicity, access to resources and cultural background. The study includes data from 240 participants (male and female) working in the formal and informal sectors of Afghanistan.

The feminist viewpoint guided the methods and evaluation used in this study. The survey questions, both open- and closed-ended, aimed to identify the conceptual framework of the structures, conditions and social factors that impacted empowerment of women in Afghanistan. Half an hour interviews were conducted to identify the issues pertaining to marginalization of women from both male and female employees working in various organizations across Afghanistan, especially in Kabul. The questions in these interviews and surveys tried to highlight both social conditions and relational dimensions that facilitated or impeded women’s empowerment.

Table 1: Demographics of study participants

Demographics	Frequency	Percentage
Gender		
Male	90	37.5%
Female	150	62.5%
Education		
Uneducated	10	4.2%
High School	100	41.6%
College educated	130	54.2%
Employment		
Formal Sector	72	30%
Informal Sector	160	70%
Ethnicity		
Pashtun	120	50%
Tajik	72	30%
Hazara	48	20%

Cluster analysis was used to examine the responses from the participants; they were grouped according to similarity of their responses—positive and negative—regarding social conditions and relational dimensions affecting Afghan women’s empowerment. A large number of participants responded negatively to the questions of supporting structures and policies.

2. Social Conditions that Empower or Marginalize Afghan Women

In the aftermath of war, the renewed emphasis on expansion of women participation and “emergence of legalistic discourse of equality” exposed ordinary women to discourses about their rights and responsibilities (Kabeer et al., 2011, p. 20). However, a number of conditions constrained Afghan women’s capacity to attain well-being from these rights. The results of the surveys and interviews indicated that more than 50% of the participants believed that the social structures, legal discourses and instrumental policies contributed to marginalization of women despite international community’s efforts for promoting women empowerment.

This section attempts to identify the social conditions that limited women’s ability to attain well-being from these rights, situations that empowered or marginalized women.

Table 2: Social conditions that affect women empowerment

Themes	Clusters	Frequency	Percentage
Gender Framework	Effective	132	55 %
	Ineffective	108	45 %
Social Structures	Supportive	12	10 %
	Not Supportive	228	90 %
Legal Support	Effective	36	15 %
	Ineffective	204	85 %
Donor Policies	Facilitating	72	30 %
	Not facilitating	168	70 %

Patriarchal Structures

Gender equality framework advocated by the international development agencies, while considered as positive indicators of liberation and justice for international community, may be a sign of empowerment only for some women. Around 45% of the respondents claimed that the existing women empowerment approaches undertaken by the donor communities have failed to complement the Afghan context. Despite the West’s interpretation of Afghan culture as oppressive, a majority of Afghan women give due regard to their culture and religion in shaping their values of change (Kabeer et al., 2001). In a survey, Abu-Loghod (2002) notes that many women in Afghanistan aspire to achieve the goals of gender equality within an Islamic framework. On the same note, Abirafeh (2009) notes that almost every Afghan—man or woman—underscored the importance of attaining gains within the context of religion. Unsurprisingly, many Afghans have expressed their disillusionment with the international organization’s women rights-based policies and gender-mainstreaming approaches, which are often considered to be Western constructs imposed on them. This also suggests a need to evaluate the gender responsiveness of aid intervention policies, as well as the discourses surrounding gender equality in the community. Therefore, a deep analysis of Afghan society would lead to creation of interventions which complement women’s realities (Abirafeh, 2009).

The Moral Community—Rights and Obligations

The survey and interview results indicated that the prevailing women right-based intervention measures have failed to keep the gendered patterns into consideration. Most of the male respondents claimed that these policies were considered antagonistic and they excluded men. The asymmetric power dynamics characterizing the marriage and family life of Afghan women makes it hard for them to contest perceived injustices (Abirafeh, 2004; Kabeer et al., 2011). In Afghanistan, women’s complementary relationship to men “serves to secure the social standing of the family and the coherence of the community, but at the cost of their ability to negotiate their rights or protect themselves” (Kabeer et al., 2011, p. 9). Likewise, Abirafeh (2009) highlights that the so-called beneficiaries (women) of the empowerment policies were not able to exercise this right at home. She further states that many participating women gave a major portion of their financial support to their husbands in order not to antagonize them. Men’s inability to access opportunities not only magnified the inequalities, but also exacerbated violence against women. Afghan women not only suggested a lack of agency to exercise freedom, they were also cognizant of gendered patterns, the structures and institutions in Afghan society that perpetuate discrimination and an absence of well-being (Moghadam, 2002). Whereas they have persistently highlighted these problems, they have found it difficult to make these issues noticeable to the

society and to change them (Long, 2007). In this vein, it is; therefore, imperative to comprehend masculinities within the analysis of gender order in aid interventions (Abirafeh, 2009). Similarly, Manganaro and Alozie (2011, p. 527) rightfully maintain, “Maximum results will accrue in Afghanistan where women are being mainstreamed at the same time that men are re-socialized, as well as exposed to stimuli, that will liberalize their gender role attitudes.” Flood and colleagues concur; they see the commitment and participation of men as significant in solving problems related to gender inequality (Flood et al., 2011).

Legal Discourses Related to Equality

Although the improvements in governance structures in the period of the aftermath has shifted the legalistic discourses of equality, a number of studies indicate that the gender asymmetries rooted in customary norms have affected the empowerment/emancipation of Afghan women (Kabeer et al., 2011). While awareness of rights and responsibilities did not yield any tangible benefits to Afghan women, a majority of Afghans believe that the transformative efforts paved the way for the rise of a conservative backlash against the empowerment of women (Kandiyoti, 1991). Likewise, the absence of a legalistic and judicial framework to endorse women’s right to empowerment and equality has undermined a decade long effort of gender-focused interventions. 85% of the respondents considered lack of sound legal support as the major impediment to effective implementation of gender-focused interventions in Afghanistan. Many Afghan women, while being aware of their entitlements, have expressed their concerns regarding the implementation of their rights due to absence of a support framework (Long, 2007). This concern was often highlighted by women who showed their dissatisfaction with the insignificant interventions in legalistic and judicial aspects—which in turn constrained their achievement of equality and justice in real terms (Abirafeh, 2009). The absence of effective legal structures suggests that attempts at women empowerment tend to reinforce the prevailing injustice and inequality.

Instrumentalist Policies

The tendency of the aid agencies to promote ingenious programs without an in-depth analysis has hardly contributed to any improvements in the lives of Afghan women (Azerbaijani-Moghaddam, 2004). According to a number of reports, Afghan women believe that gender-awareness strategies have failed to bring about any effective benefits to them; the benefits such as education beyond primary level, well-paid employment opportunities, safety and free movement in public (Abirafeh, 2009; Kabeer et al., 2011). The survey results also indicated that most of these gender mainstreaming approaches were aimed at achieving a particular target without helping women realize their potential to the fullest. This approach has; therefore, made them present, but not powerful. Abirafeh (2009) criticizes the interventions’ quick fix approach to capitalize on the influx of aid in Afghanistan during the initial period of aftermath. One example is the income generation programs, which reinforce women’s traditional roles by supporting gender-stereotyped livelihoods. Additionally, UN’s strategy on Women, Economic Security and Rights and women’s other economic participation programs are criticized for using gender equality as an instrument to achieve the poverty alleviation targets (MDG) and not as a goal in itself (Ganesh et al., 2013). Debusscher (2013) contends that such instrumentalist policies tend to preserve the established gender roles rather than to eliminate gender inequalities. Given that Afghan women do not have the effective means to claim independence or demand their rights, awareness about rights and equality becomes superfluous (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2006). In a similar vein, critics underscore the importance of true economic independence for women in their struggle to define their rights (Ahmed-Ghoshi, 2006; Long, 2007; Abirafeh, 2009).

3. Discussion

The analysis of inequality as described by the extent of opportunities women have, is inadequate for understanding the fundamental conditions and reasons that give rise to inequalities. The findings illustrate that the hindrances experienced by Afghan women are reinforced by various social conditions and structures. In order to target precise underlying causes of marginalization, it is imperative to understand these differences that would, otherwise, be missed by blanket, inflexible and top-down interventions. The examination of gender inequalities related to patriarchal structures, legal discourses, and the power dynamics has implications for policies and approaches that the international community and Afghan government take up in relation to promoting empowerment and gender equality.

This analysis highlighted the social conditions and institutional structures (capabilities) that are critical to women's empowerment. It revealed that shifting gender norms in Afghanistan have had unintended consequences, often magnifying the inequalities and exacerbating the issues related to domestic violence and abuse. Limiting access of men to opportunities infuriated them as they felt they were no longer the breadwinners of the family; therefore, the incidents of violence and abuse augmented. These issues demand attention to relations between the two genders, as well as to the established norms of femininities and masculinities (Dunne et al., 2006). These problems must be addressed through broader changes in the institutional structures and community, as gender-awareness programs are partly effective in promoting gender equality.

Moreover, attitudes about women's empowerment suggests that while reforms are being made to promote women's participation in social and economic spheres (Abirafeh, 2009), an absence of legal framework in the country reinforces a concern about the women's independence and effective participation. Given the inability of current legal discourses to improve the discrepancies of traditional patriarchy, gender-focused interventions may be constrained as a revolutionary catalyst for empowering women economically and socially in their communities (Abirafeh, 2004; Kabeer et al., 2011).

Last but not least, the findings from the preceding evaluation illustrate that encouraging relations form a valuable capability that can be effectively changed into well-being, and that social conditions in which women can exercise agency influence these relations (Sen, 2009). Empowerment from a capabilities framework is more than a woman aspiring to become socially or economically independent; crucially important are the institutional structures and the social conditions for these women to tackle the wider equality issues for attaining well-being.

Conclusions

This paper critically evaluated the gender-focused aid intervention policies in Afghanistan and analyzed the utility of the capabilities framework for understanding the issues surrounding women empowerment and gender inequality in Afghanistan. Starting from the main features of the policy and its current impact on promoting gender equality in Afghanistan, the paper discovered that empowerment and gender equality remain a highly politicized and complex issue in the country. This also entailed significant limitations of the present approach, as assumptions regarding its effectiveness for Afghanistan at large are dependent upon the social and environmental conditions, which are deeply ingrained in culture and religion. It applied Sen's capabilities approach to enhance our understanding of empowerment and marginalization for Afghan women. The paper attempted to use the beneficiaries' perspectives—in this case Afghan women, which were obtained from the surveys, interviews, and findings and reports of researchers involved in the relevant field.

This paper argued that Afghan women cannot be disassociated from the societies in which they live in, and the efforts at empowerment mainly failed because they did not have a base of community support; these programs drew instead on ineffective models that were not

customized to embody the political and social realities of Afghan society (International Crisis Group, 2003). Furthermore, it asserts that the international community's gender-focused approach has not been steered by the country's history, but by an aspiration for a quick fix solution. The participation and commitment of Afghan men were underlined as an important prerequisite for narrowing the gap between rhetoric and reality. As Abirafeh (2009, p. 188) rightfully argued, "it is through the voices of Afghan men and women... that understandings of freedom are imagined."

All things considered, this paper has attempted to add value to the application of the capabilities framework for understanding social structures and conditions that empower or marginalize women in Afghanistan. It maintains that the research could go further, both in terms of theoretical developments and effective empirical basis.



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