

The Anthony Hyman Memorial Lecture

School of Oriental and African Studies

University of London

The lures and perils of gender activism in Afghanistan

2009

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I feel both honoured and gratified to be offering the 7th Anthony Hyman Memorial Lecture. This gives me the opportunity to acknowledge my debt of gratitude to Tony for his unwavering support and friendship over the years. When I met Tony in 1991 at a conference at SOAS, I was taking my first, rather tentative steps in the direction of becoming a scholar of Central Asia. In the years that followed, I benefited from his unstinting generosity and encouragement. A great deal has happened since, which I feel certain, Tony would have approved of. The Centre of Contemporary Central Asia and the Caucasus was launched in 2001. *Central Asian Survey*, the journal Tony gave such long and dedicated service to, is since 2006 also based at SOAS. However, what might have come as more of a surprise to Tony is my involvement in Afghanistan.

I started to work on Afghanistan in 2002, at the behest of my late friend and colleague, Parvin Paidar, a courageous and vibrant Iranian feminist, who had taken on the challenging task of heading UNIFEM in Kabul. It is at a party at Parvin's house in Tashkent, while she was still with Save the Children Fund, that a group of us met Tony at a point when we already knew this was going to be his last trip to Central Asia. We lost Parvin in 2005, aged 56. The talk you are about to hear is part of a conversation I would have liked to have had with her-and of course, with Tony.

Those of us who work on gender issues routinely lament their marginality to discussions of the global economy, conflict and politics. In Afghanistan, by contrast, I found myself in a situation where there was an abundance- even an excess- of analysis and commentary, descending, at times, into "gender chatter". I recall a vague sense of unease over the tone and content of some of these contributions. It took me some time to realize that there were good reasons behind my sense of intellectual and moral puzzlement. The debates on gender- and their multiple undercurrents- were emanating from very different discursive universes, each following their own internal logic and apparently evolving on parallel tracks.

Today I propose to examine three distinct strands of discourse on gender and women's rights in Afghanistan. The first manifests itself in debates among Northern feminists and public intellectuals -many of whom have little or no prior exposure to Afghanistan- speaking to each other "through" Afghan women. These debates are primarily anchored in the moral anxieties generated by the events of September 11, 2001 and the ensuing "war on terror". The first part of my talk titled '*Feminism-as-imperialism or conversations "through" Afghan women*' focuses on these exchanges.

The second strand of discourse emanates from UN agencies which, alongside various bilateral and multilateral donors, were applying their global prescriptions for "best practice" to

promote gender equality to Afghanistan.¹ The second part of my talk titled ‘*Donor-driven gender activism: engineering gender equality*’ considers the effects of these efforts.

Finally, there are sharp internal debates in Afghanistan involving parliamentarians, clerics, bureaucrats, the media and local NGOs concerning the acceptability of a rights agenda that mandates the expansion of women’s constitutional, political and civic rights. These internal tensions, which I analyze under the rubric of ‘*Internal struggles and uneasy compromises*’, reflect the power struggles between contending political factions that use women’s rights as a litmus test of Islamic legitimacy. I feel there is a degree of political urgency in unpacking these disparate strands both because their coexistence may produce various unintended consequences and because they may offer broader insights into the causes of a growing malaise surrounding gender-targeted interventions, in general, and their deployment in post-conflict contexts, in particular.

“*Feminism-as-imperialism*” or conversations “*through*” Afghan women

Shortly after the September 11, 2001 events, Operation Enduring Freedom, led by US and a coalition of international forces resulted in the overthrow of the Taliban. By that stage, the outrages committed by the Taliban in the name of Islam and, specifically, the public punishments they meted out to women for infractions of their strict rules had become a *cause celebre*. However, far from inspiring an unqualified response of international feminist solidarity the US military intervention provoked a spate of critical reactions triggered by the naked instrumentalism behind the invocation of abused Afghan women. Judith Butler, among others, remarked that “the sudden feminist conversion on the part of the Bush administration, which retroactively transformed the liberation of women into a rationale for its military action against Afghanistan, is a sign of the extent to which feminism, as a trope is deployed in the service of restoring the presumption of first world impermeability”.² Iris Young noted “...that feminist focus on women under the Taliban constructed these women as exoticized others and paradigmatic victims in need of salvation by Western feminists”.³ The iconic moment of this exoticization undoubtedly came when, after a reading of Eve Ensler’s poem “Under the Burqa”, Oprah Winfrey, invited a burqa-clad young member of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) on stage and unveiled her to the rapturous applause of a packed New York audience. Quite predictably, this incident added to the already copious literature on the “politics of representation” of Muslim women with their well-rehearsed references to Orientalism and the patronizing designs of imperialism.⁴

Other commentators, such as Adams and Orloff, on the other hand, expounded on the theme of the “clash of civilizations”, and argued that “Gender is an explicit structuring principle of contemporary conflicts between Western powers and ... Islamic fundamentalism”.⁵ They

¹ Kardam applies the term “global gender equality regime” to denote the ensemble of international legislative and normative frameworks that regulate gender equality. Nukhet Kardam *Turkey’s engagement with Global Women’s Human Rights* Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005.

² Judith Butler *Prekarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* London: Verso, 2004, p. 41.

³ M.I. Young ‘The Logic of Masculinist Protection: Reflections on the Current Security State’ *Signs* 29 (1) 2003:pp. 18-19.

⁴ Some examples may be found in K. Ayotte, and M. Husain ‘Securing Afghan Women: Neo-colonialism, Epistemic Violence and the Rhetoric of the Veil’ *NWSA Journal*, 17 (3) 2005: 112-133;; C. Stabile and D. Kumar ‘Unveiling imperialism: media, gender and the war on Afghanistan’ *Media, Culture and Society* 27 (5) 2005: 765-782; G. Whitlock *Soft weapons: Autobiography in Transit* Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

⁵ Julia Adams and Ann Shola Orloff “Defending Modernity? High Politics, Feminist Anti-Modernism and the Place of Gender” *Politics & Gender* 1 (1): 2005, p 167.

went on to identify the reasoning behind Iris Young's arguments as "feminist anti-modernism", citing the findings of cross-national survey research by Ronald Inglehart and Pippa Norris (and their article in the popular Ms. magazine humorously titled "it's the women, stupid") as empirical confirmation of their argument. Contra Huntington who suggested that there were key differences on the value of democracy between the Muslim world and the West, Inglehart and Norris had found that the greatest gap in opinion centred around issues relating to gender and sexuality. Feminists, Adams and Orloff concluded, should not lightly dismiss the fact, that despite its contradictory trajectory, modernity offers the best hope for gender equality.

What is noteworthy about these debates is that, with few exceptions, their protagonists were Northern feminists and public intellectuals whose primary concerns centred less on the plight of Afghan women *per se* than on the transformation of their own state and society in the aftermath of the 9/11 events. Their writings gave voice to deep ethical misgivings about the consequences of the war on terror. The objectification of Afghan women as "exoticized victims" and their deployment as an instrument of war propaganda was but one item in a noxious mix that included the suspension of liberties through the Patriot Act and new forms of legal impunity around the use of torture and extra-legal detention. A common reaction to the "othering" of women in Afghanistan was, paradoxically, a fulsome recognition of their radical alterity. As Butler put it eloquently "It is not possible to impose a language of politics developed within First World contexts on women who are facing the threat of imperialist economic exploitation and cultural obliteration"⁶

Leaving aside the question of why "cultural obliteration" (a favourite trope of Islamist politics) was being put on the agenda, this begs the question of who precisely we are talking about when we speak of Afghan women. Were these women urban PDPA loyalists? Members of royalist factions residing in the diaspora? Supporters of one or the other *mujahidin* faction? Dispossessed women in refugee camps? Educated professionals? What different imaginaries of Afghanistan did these women hold? Just as the politics of "othering" had transformed the women of Afghanistan into faceless victims, so had the claim that they were representatives of a seamlessly unified culture. The notion that the women of Afghanistan could be as diverse and as deeply politicized as their male counterparts was becoming increasingly difficult to accommodate.

How can we account for this state of affairs? Lila Abu-Lughod insightfully remarked that the perpetuation of a "cultural" framing of gender relations successfully obfuscated the social and political effects of successive interventions establishing the ascendancy of Islamist parties backed by a variety of foreign patrons.⁷ Nancy Lindisfarne noted, likewise, that it was during the *mujahidin* period that gendered inequality and violence became "naturalized" as intrinsic

⁶ Butler *ibid.* p.49.

⁷ L. Abu-Lughod 'Do Muslim women really need saving? Anthropological reflections on cultural relativism and its others', *American Anthropologist*. 104, (3) 2002: 1-8. C. Hirschkind and Mahmood are also alert to the geopolitical context but fall into the trap of making invidious and quite unnecessary comparisons between the levels of violence against women meted out by the *mujahidin* and the Taliban, declaring the latter to offer greater security to women. Hirschkind and S. Mahmood "Feminism, the Taliban, and Politics of Counter-Insurgency" *Anthropological Quarterly* 75 (2) 2002: p.339-354. A similar exchange among French feminists on the relative cruelty to women of the Taliban vs. the *mujahidin* may be found in Françoise Causse "Les dangereuses theses de Christine Delphy" <http://www.afghana.org/html/article.php?sid+2473&thold=0> accessed 6/11/2007

to ‘Afghan culture’ and ‘Afghan Islam’.⁸ The strategic silence surrounding abuses of human rights, including extreme forms of gender-based violence, in the context of the US-backed Cold War efforts to resist the Soviet invasion of 1979 have undoubtedly reinforced the tendency to consign gender relations to an unchanging (and under theorized) realm of culture. This tendency has, if anything, gained further momentum in the context of donor-led reconstruction and state-building efforts, with numerous policy documents routinely making references to Afghan “traditions” and “culture”. Richard Tapper, in his contribution to the 6th Anthony Hyman Memorial Lecture last year, reminded us of the diverse uses (and abuses) of this term. Nonetheless, after the Bonn Agreement in 2001, Afghanistan became the target of a sustained- if ill-coordinated- campaign to institutionalize mechanisms and benchmarks for gender equality. It is to these efforts that I now turn my attention.

Donor-driven gender activism: engineering gender equality

I shall henceforth use the term *donor-driven gender activism* (as distinct from feminism, however defined) to refer to the effects of the global *dispositif* regulating gender equality. In order to better understand the various initiatives intended to promote gender equality in Afghanistan, it is important to situate these in the context of mechanisms that global governance institutions (UN agencies in particular) deploy in the service of a gender equality agenda.

The state-building effort in Afghanistan was driven by a succession of international meetings leading to benchmark documents and time-tables. These were in turn: Securing Afghanistan’s Future (2004), The Afghanistan Compact (2006) and I-ANDS (2006) leading to ANDS. The gender policies of the Government of Afghanistan were formulated within the framework of these international agreements.

First, signing up to various protocols and conventions is a key signifier of state sovereignty and membership in the international community represented by UN member states. Afghanistan became a party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), without reservations, on March 5th, 2003. This was a particularly intriguing move in view of the fact that most states deriving their personal status codes from the *shari’a* have entered multiple reservations before becoming signatories of CEDAW. For reasons I shall discuss later, this convention seems fated to remain a dead letter in Afghanistan.⁹ Nonetheless, numerous documents continue to refer to CEDAW and to Article 7 of the 2004 Constitution which requires that the state of Afghanistan “abide by the UN Charter, international treaties, international conventions that Afghanistan has signed, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights”.

Second, it is worth noting the effects of a succession of United Nations World conferences on Women (from 1975 in Mexico City to Beijing in 1995, followed by Beijing+10) each followed by Platforms for Action that set targets for member states. Various transnational feminist alliances form around UN platforms to lobby governments and international organizations on key policy issues. For instance, the Feminist Majority Foundation Campaign to Stop Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan is credited with having played a significant role in 1998 in persuading the UN and the US to reject formal recognition of the Taliban. At the national level, the Afghan delegation that participated in the Beijing+10 UN Women’s

⁸ Nancy Lindisfarne ‘Starting from Below: Fieldwork, Gender and Imperialism Now’ *Critique of Anthropology* 22 (4) 2002: 403-423.

⁹ Signatory governments are normally expected to produce progress reports. At the time of writing, no such report has been forthcoming.

Conference in New York in 2005 used the event to push for the adoption of a National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA). The 10-year National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA), prepared with technical assistance from UNIFEM, was designated in the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) as the principal policy tool to support gender mainstreaming.

Thirdly, the creation of national machineries for the advancement of women, to follow up on global commitments, was also implemented in Afghanistan. The Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA) was established in 2002 and charged with mainstreaming gender into the policies and programmes of the line ministries to ensure that gender equality concerns are addressed. This Ministry has a tenuous existence constantly at risk of being abolished, without a core budget and heavily reliant on international technical assistance. Gender mainstreaming was identified in the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) as the main strategy for achieving gender equality. The "toolbox" for gender mainstreaming, tried and tested in many other countries, was also deployed in Afghanistan. This consisted of the establishment of gender units, gender focal points and working groups in mainline ministries and creation of inter-ministerial task forces, to co-ordinate various donor-funded programmes.

A study by the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) assessing the effects of these efforts in six selected ministries revealed a great deal of confusion over the meaning of gender (as distinct from women), a lack of clarity about the mandate of gender units (or even total lack of awareness about their existence), a general tendency to assign low priority to gender issues and a preoccupation with the degree of fit between gender mainstreaming and Islamic prescriptions (variously interpreted by different respondents).¹⁰ Interestingly, despite 30 years of war that eroded the central administration, the ministries in question were not quite the *tabula rasa* donors imagined them to be. Their most proximate experiences of women's advancement dated from the PDPA period when women's *shuras* took up women's grievances over work and pay conditions and staged celebrations of International Women's Day on the 8th of March- a practice that evidently lives on. The welfarist paternalism of Soviet-inspired policies appear to have had more resonance with the rank and file than the abstract language of gender training. It appears, therefore, that the apparatus of "gender mainstreaming" was grafted upon an institutional culture that did not so much resist its introduction as sideline it. Parallel structures are set up to satisfy donor requirements whilst carrying on with business as usual.

The principal driving force behind the mainstreaming agenda were foreign technical assistants allocated to ministries by various bilateral donor agencies to train locals in the vocabulary of gender mainstreaming and gender training and making them fit to produce the accountability mechanisms required by the donors. This replicates a pattern already noted by many commentators concerning the creation of a better paid "second civil service" consisting of international technical advisors who are able to interface with the donors, produce the necessary documents and meet their deadlines. A process of foreign-assisted policy formulation linked into a sub-contracting structure of international and local NGOs for the implementation of specific programmes meant that a process of selection operated, excluding the non-English-speaking and non-"gender-trained". Although this is by no means unique to Afghanistan, a particularly narrow base of female human capital and expertise was redirected to staffing projects and programmes designed by international agencies and their foreign consultants.

The general malaise about the ineffectiveness and misdirection of aid had made it possible for a populist candidate from Kabul to win a seat in parliament on an anti-foreign NGO ticket.

¹⁰ Anna Larson "A mandate to mainstream: Promoting Gender Equality in Afghanistan" AREU Issue Paper Series, November 2008.

When it came to gender issues this discontent had the additional bonus of carrying the charge of being Western and therefore alien. The global iniquities of US interventions in Iraq, its support of Israel's wars and the treatment of detainees in Guantanamo enhanced the symbolic resources that Islamist constituencies could mobilize against the government, further marginalizing the tenuous hold that gender activists had on the policy formulation process.

But what of women civil society activists who had worked tirelessly, both at home and in the diaspora, and who have no wish to see their hard won gains being annulled yet again? Surely dismissing them as Western-looking and donor-driven would be a gross misrepresentation since their presence and activities are of long standing and there are a variety of tendencies among them-including women seeking a more egalitarian voice within an Islamic framework. Indeed, the relatively limited mobilization of women during periods of state-led modernization in Afghanistan received a new impetus through the experiences of displacement and exile. The number of Afghan women's NGOs operating in the diaspora increased, establishing women as civil society actors. Even under the Taliban and despite serious pressures, there is evidence that women's solidarity networks and organizations, some of which operated clandestinely, acted as a medium of both political resistance and empowerment. As late as 2002, I witnessed that UN Habitat Women's Community Forums-one of the donor-funded initiatives that had managed to survive under the Taliban and offered women literacy and income generation skills, still managed to retain some of their highly skilled, educated members working alongside the poorer sections of the community. That was soon to change. Within a year, the educated and the English speaking had deserted their posts for more lucrative jobs in the aid industry. A female "brain drain" was operating to staff the donor-funded sector.

However, these considerations are of minor importance if we consider that the term "mainstreaming" itself begs the question in Afghanistan. While all efforts were concentrating on ministerial structures and reforms in Kabul, the writ of the government was running less and less in the rest of the country with large swathes of the east and south in the grip of a Taliban insurgency. This led to the cessation or slowing down of reconstruction efforts and NGO activities. The reach of the central state was severely limited and what little of it there was appeared to be plagued by rampant corruption. Informal, local level customary institutions would continue, as ever, to play a central role. Indeed, one school of thought argued that if Afghanistan had not descended into total chaos during the war years this was due to the resilience of sub-national forms of informal governance, relying on customary organizations such as *shuras* and *jirgas*.

Although women are almost totally excluded for participating in decision-making in these bodies and despite the fact that these informal institutions uphold forms of customary practice that violate both international human rights law and the letter of the *shari'a*, they play a central role in local governance. In the face of these realities, the 2007 *Human Development* report proposed a hybrid model of justice for Afghanistan combining alternative dispute resolution mechanisms based on non-state informal institutions with compliance with international human rights standards.

Herein lies one of the major contradictions of the gender equality platform in Afghanistan. There are inherent tensions between the goals of state-building according to international norms, on the one hand, and pragmatic accommodations to realities on the ground, on the other. The vast majority of women in Afghanistan have little contact with state institutions, markets or civil society organizations and remain the wards of their communities and households. They are totally disenfranchised to the extent that they have little recourse to formal institutions and the justice system (which, is in any case, heavily biased against female claimants) and are disadvantaged and marginalized in customary law. Ultimately, the blueprint for "gender mainstreaming" is destined to remain hollow if it continues to inhabit a

technocratic space that is almost entirely divorced from political processes in Afghanistan. It is to these political processes that I finally turn my attention.

Internal struggles and uneasy compromises

Behind me is an image from a celebratory calendar for 2002, marking the fall of the Taliban. A woman is shown shedding tears, with a padlocked school in the background. The caption in both Dari and English reads “What a good day it was when we could go to school”- a reference to the ban on girls’ schooling under the Taliban. Her lifted burqa, baring her face, and her longing for study seem to presage a new dawn for the women of Afghanistan. Realities on the ground, however, were to prove more complex than this image suggests.

On the eve of the Bonn Agreement that lay the groundwork for the new Afghan state in December 2001, the *mujahidin* factions of the Northern Alliance, that had received the bulk of US assistance in the operations leading to the eventual overthrow of the Taliban, emerged as the strongest players. These players, based on constituencies among northern and central ethnic groups, namely Tajiks, Uzbeks and Hazaras were determined to resist the reinstatement of Pashtun dominance, not only in the form of Taliban rule, but also in the shape of a centralised governance apparatus based on a strong presidential system. This was an issue that was bitterly fought over in the process leading to the Constitution adopted in 2004.¹¹ Debates over the constitutional role of Islam- and the extent to which equal rights for men and women could be enshrined in legislation- became deeply entangled in the compromises reached between *mujahidin* factions and the new technocrats of an aid-dependent government- a dependence that brought with it, among other things, a request for compliance with international legal standard setting instruments.

This led to a Constitution with several potentially contradictory clauses, stipulating on the one hand that Afghanistan ‘abide by the UN Charter, international treaties, international conventions that Afghanistan has signed, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights’ (Article 7) and, on the other hand, that ‘no law can be contrary to the beliefs and the provisions of the sacred religion of Islam (Article 3)’ This last article, along with its affiliate which declares Afghanistan an Islamic state, is not subject to amendment and the *ulama* retain substantial powers of arbitration through their representation in the Supreme Court. The *mujahidin* parties, pressing their nationalistic credentials as the liberators of the country from both Soviet rule and from the Taliban, were able to accuse their detractors (including some women MPs taking them to task over their human rights record) with nothing short of treason.¹² The constituencies pushing for an expansion of women’s rights had a weak hand to play and little traction with the emerging power blocks.

Dorransoro reminds us that, in comparison to the pre-war period, the ideological field was rendered homogenous by the *jihad* years when Islamic ideologies achieved total hegemony and the differences between tendencies became harder to discern on some issues such as the

¹¹ Barnett Rubin “Crafting a Constitution for Afghanistan” in Said Samir Arjomand (ed.) *Constitutional Politics in the Middle East* Oxford: Hart Publishing, 2008.147-161.

¹² A well publicized incident took place when Malalai Joya, a young woman delegate from Farah province, made a speech accusing the *mujahidin* of human rights abuses and inviting them to take their share of responsibility in the destruction of the country. This resulted in a threat of expulsion from the *Loya Jirga* by the Chairman and furious outbursts by *mujahidin* representatives. Accusations flew in the *Mujahid* press organs that she was an *agent provocateur*. There were protests in the liberal press over her treatment and expressions of support. The UN stepped in to offer Malalai Joya protection and the threat of expulsion was stalled. She was eventually elected to parliament but suspended for the duration of her term in office.

status of women.¹³ The fact that foreign aid to the resistance was channelled through the Pakistani government, which singled out seven Sunni Islamist parties as ‘official’ recipients of assistance had a decisive impact on the shape of the political field. Anthony Hyman noted in his influential book *Afghanistan Under Soviet domination, 1964 – 83* that these parties had little influence inside Afghanistan before the Soviet invasion.¹⁴ These are the legacies that were to prove decisive for the politics of gender in post-Bonn Afghanistan.

Giustozzi offers a plausible account of the political alignments on the eve of the Bonn Agreement in 2001.¹⁵ When the Coalition that emerged from Operation Enduring Freedom started to look for likely collaborators for their project of state-building they found members of the tribal aristocracy, that were initially split between the supporters of Karzai and Zahir Shah loyalists, and a cadre of technocrats that was needed to interface with international donors. These technocrats were found from among expatriates trained in the West, many of them Afghan-Americans. What was left of the educated elite in the country itself was fragmented, since the former intelligentsia, outside the cities, had a background in communist parties. This made for a divided and fragile ‘modernist’ bloc, that did not have a common agenda, and whose only chance of reaching to the country was by striking alliances with local warlords or militia leaders who had established zones of influence during the war years.

The cooptation of warlords into the state administration and security forces had important implications. These forces were deeply concerned about competition from other social groups, claiming a guaranteed role in running the Afghan state, a claim that served as a rallying point of the Islamic parties. Not coincidentally, the Coalition itself continued to distribute arms and money to the same strongmen and militia armies to assist them in the ongoing battle against Al Qaeda and the Taliban. This conflict over power and control saw a series of successive realignments that only led to deepening levels of corruption and entanglements with the criminalized narcotics economy reaching into the heart of the central state. The US pursuit of a “security” agenda to the detriment of nation-building meant that the high expectations raised for the country’s development were soon dashed as ordinary citizens were faced with increasing insecurity and rampant corruption. This disillusionment did not create but undoubtedly helped to fuel a revitalized Taliban insurgency that now makes it quite likely that the “peace process” will be broadened to include moderate elements of the Taliban willing to renounce violence.

It does not require a great deal of imagination to surmise that one of the inevitable items of compromise may concern women’s civic and political rights and the regulation of their public presence; indeed, the term “compromise” might be a misnomer since this may constitute the main plank of a populist consensus. Constitutional gains notwithstanding, and despite an impressive female presence in the legislature- a quota of 25% in the *Wolesi Jirga*- women have an extremely tenuous hold on the public sphere that is constantly contested and exposes them to persistent danger and intimidation.¹⁶ From the outset, the narrow constituency that put its weight behind reforms leading to the expansion of women’s civic and political rights

¹³ Gilles Dorronsoro *Revolution Unending: Afghanistan: 1979 to the Present* London: Hurst and Co., 2005.

¹⁴ See A Hyman, *Afghanistan Under Soviet domination, 1964 – 83*, London: Macmillan, 1984.

¹⁵ Antonio Giustozzi ‘Good State’ vs. ‘Bad Warlords’? *A Critique of State-Building Strategies in Afghanistan* Crisis States Working Paper no. 51, October 2004.

¹⁶ Anand Gopal *Afghanistan: Women Lawmakers Battle Warlords*
<http://www.ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=46028> accessed on 10/3/09.

did so with the backing of UN agencies and financial support from international donors. Many donors, however, and most particularly the international financial institutions (IFIs) are more than ready to cede on matters of gender equality in the name of “cultural sensitivity”. The World Bank, for instance, gave its backing to gender mainstreaming most guardedly stating clearly this should be done only “along the least confrontational lines”.¹⁷ The common platform that both the government and the IFIs could sign up to was the improvement of women’s basic literacy and maternal health in the service of national development and meeting the targets set by the Millennium Development Goals.

Ironically, the left/liberal detractors of the “war on terror” could now join World Bank experts in decreeing gender as an area in need of protection against cultural imperialism. This inadvertently encourages an implicit endorsement of a reified model of gender, based on frequently untested assumptions concerning timeless normative frameworks regulating gender relations in Afghanistan. There is little serious engagement with the effects of the political economy of conflict on household formation and on gender relations. Yet, as Barnett Rubin reminded us in the opening lecture of this series, imagining that tensions between the sexes and generations “over honour, pride, and marriage” did not escalate as a result of years of protracted conflict would be naive. Little thought is given to the possibility that what to Western eyes looks like “tradition” is, in many instances, the manifestation of new and more brutal forms of subjugation of the weak made possible by a commodified criminal economy, total lack of security and the erosion of bonds of trust and solidarity that were tested to the limit by war, social upheaval and poverty.¹⁸

Male “honour” is premised, among other things, on men’s ability to shelter women in the domestic domain by providing for them. The disjuncture between “honour” as a normative discourse and the material realities of Afghan life are evident everywhere - in the destitution of widows reduced to begging and prostitution, in the sale of girls to settle opium debts, in the trafficking of boys and girls for sex and labour, in the gang rape of young girls by local strongmen in full view of their families. Most Afghans would recognize these phenomena not as extensions of their culture but, on the contrary, as a comprehensive breakdown of the informal rules of trust, decency and reciprocity they would like to see restored to the lives of their communities and polity.

The politics of gender can never be divorced from politics with a capital P. The lures of looking for technocratic solutions or culturalist explanations in matters of gender equality may be great, but these can only be indulged in at the peril of ignoring the profoundly political stakes around different visions of Afghan society.

¹⁷ World Bank, Interim Strategy Note for Islamic Republic of Afghanistan for the period FY07 – FY08. (Washington, DC: World Bank,2006).

¹⁸ Deniz Kandiyoti “Old Dilemmas or New Challenges? The Politics of Gender and Reconstruction in Afghanistan” *Development and Change* Vol. 38, no. 2, 2007, pp. 169-199.