

yet possesses a culture of data collection and, whilst efforts are being made to change this, largely we rely on anecdote for it still rings truer right now. As the future may give rise to accurate census and all its associated stratifications, so does the present still lend itself to more concrete, close-to-

important body, namely the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission continues to monitor and report on the current human rights situation in Afghanistan. In 2008, the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan that sets out an operational framework for furthering gender equality and women's empowerment under the Afghan National Development Strategy framework was put in place. Last but not least, Afghanistan is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Elimination of Violence against Women and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

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In 2002, the first youth civil society conference was held in Kabul, followed by the establishment of the Afghan Youth Coordination Agency in 2003.

Subsequent regional youth conferences were held and in 2005, the Afghan Government created the Afghan Minis

National Youth Policy.

However today, with international assistance and thereby mechanisms for accountability gradually reducing, it is becoming increasingly apparent that the implementation of processes to improve the situation of women and youth in Afghanistan is lagging behind the ambitious conceptual framework that the international community and Afghan Government have created over the past decade. The representation and active participation of women and the youth in the political, economical and social spheres remain limited, reflecting the highly volatile and uncertain future of over 70% of Afghanistan's population.

Furthermore, Afghanistan has one of the highest maternal mortality and infant mortality rates in the world.

Unfortunately, since the very beginning of efforts in Afghanistan, "gender" has been used synonymously with women and women's rights and therefore not only hampered male involvement in gender processes but far worse, only left little room to address violence, abuse and discrimination against the male population of Afghanistan. Whereas the women rights agenda has been put out into the open, the men rights agenda largely remains a taboo.

Lastly, and very pertinent to the context of Afghanistan, the traditional view of women and the youth and the absence of a grassroots support network or social movement can be regarded as the main reasons why women and the youth at

establish what gains have been made, what challenges they continue to face and what the future will likely hold.

It may come as a surprise to some of you but efforts to accord women with equal rights in Afghanistan were already undertaken way before international attention was geared towards Afghanistan in 2001. In the early nineteenth hundreds, King Amanullah Khan and his father in law, Mahmud Tarzi encouraged social reforms with particular focus on the rights of women. Queen Soraya, whom King Amanullah Khan presented to the people on the day of his inauguration, played a crucial role in this process. At a later stage, President Najibullah ensured women's access to education and the professional sphere, and subsequently both Nur Mohammad Taraqī and Hafizullah Amin introduced reforms to ensure equal rights for women and to bring an end to forced marriage. In the 1960s, when the National Police was formed under King Zahir Shah, women were recruited in small numbers and trained alongside men.

CHALLENGES

Today, and despite the fact that a legislative framework to protect women and children has been put in place, to which the Afghan Government has made a constitutional commitment, the challenges encountered by these groups seem to be on the increase. It should be noted that whereas international community involvement has certainly created opportunities for women, children and the youth alike, women in particular have been removed from their traditional role;

alas, they have not been assigned a new role or better said position within society until today.

The Ministry of Women's Affairs has limited reach and whereas oftentimes other governmental bodies acknowledge policies on gender mainstreaming and / or women's rights, implementation lacks or is frankly spoken non-existent. Gender mainstreaming across Afghan ministries has not been a successful undertaking so far. The work of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission is oftentimes politicized and as a result marginalized.

Whilst gender related progress can largely be attributed to international community involvement, women in the Government and Afghanistan's National Security Forces are subject to entrenched discrimination because they defy the traditional role accorded to women. There is limited female representation at the higher, institutional level and therefore little to no influence in policy-making processes. The role of women therefore remains strongly marginalized. Further, there is great reluctance by women to make use of female police for domestic

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violence due to a common belief that matters of such nature should not be dealt with outside of the family sphere.

The 2014 date has prompted an on-going debate about the future of

Afghanistan. Central pieces to this debate are the Transition Process and the Afghan-led Peace Process and thereto the questions whether gains made for

Afghan society have not been included.

As I stated before, it should be remembered that harmful practices affect all members of Afghan society; however, women are particularly vulnerable given that they are more likely prevented from participating in public life. The Law on

In Afghanistan, the very country that is experiencing a significant youth bulge

Secretary General to the UN General Security Council on Children and Armed

With religion being the predominant denominator in Afghan society and in combination with a largely illiterate and uneducated populace presents a rather worrisome scenario. After over ten years of an agenda that pushed democracy and its values, the rule of law, human rights and gender equality to the forefront of political statements and developmental dialogues, today we find ourselves in a place where a parliament refuses to pass a bill that ensures the safety and well being of women, where individuals proclaim that any such law stands in direct contradiction to the religion of Islam and where most concerning of all, young people, influenced by the political agendas of others, take to the streets to protest against the imposition of what they label as Western values. Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani, commonly known as Al-Afghan, one of the most renowned historic Afghan scholars famously expressed upon his return from travels aboard:

“I went to the land of unbelievers and beheld the behaviour of Muslims. Upon my return to the land of the Muslims, alas I beheld the behaviour of unbelievers”.

From the aforementioned it can be seen that in spite of sound legislation in place that would improve the situation of Afghanistan’s citizens, the Government fails to respond effectively. It furtherat3()-10(f)cgrat woul Goverets, i4(f)3(f)-eh2s7uanC /P <0iis not very efficient in a place where the l /al level remains central. Novn etheless, as can be seen, the Governementes have mechanisms in place b y which it effectivel reaches vut to the largera public.

Amnesty International, in an open letter to President Karzai and President Obama recently stated that they: “...are deeply concerned that the significant gains made by women and girls in Afghanistan may be threatened as U.S. and allied troops leave the country”.

Amnesty further urged that: “a comprehensive action plan to guarantee that the clock is not turned back on a decade of strides in education, health, security and employment for women and girls should be put in place”.

Amnesty concluded that: “...if women’s progress cannot be sustained, then Afghan society will fail”.

OPPORTUNITIES

Having said this, I do believe that there are several avenues that could be explored to define a path towards gender equality and the empowerment of women. Next to educating women in general and specifically on their rights by reaching out to communities, one way to accelerate the process could be to educate men on the rights of women. Further, the status of Afghan women can be lifted through economic empowerment. Women who work and take place in the public usually gain a higher standing 4(i)-2F2 7N W

achieve sustainability in the long term.

Government policies should be in line with UNSCR 1325, knowing full well that women play a crucial role in the prevention of violence, the resolution of ongoing conflict, and the rebuilding of post-conflict societies. This could increase the participation of women at both the decision making level as well as at the provincial level in order to foster open dialogue that would be required for

introduce and

or a disconnect between the Western approach to gender equality, women's rights and the promotion of youth and the Afghan understanding of these issues that needs to be remedied if tangible and realistic advances for Afghan society as a whole ought to be made.

What I mean to say is that whilst recognizing that there have been advances for women and the youth, primarily in the public sphere, it becomes apparent that the treatment of men and women alike needs to be put into the right context.

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Western style human practices based on the right of the individual are a privilege that a poor and collectivist society, such as the Afghan one, cannot afford.

In my opinion, Afghanistan has yet to arrive at that juncture where the role and rights of women and the youth can actually reach traction within society, rather than becoming superficial processes that are perceived by some as foreign impositions. The approach chosen for Afghanistan was certainly well intended but is simply too advanced for the social context within which Afghan society currently exists.

Let me remind all of us here today that the youth is our future and therefore our common responsibility. It is of the utmost importance to put in place a responsible and resolute approach that will allow the youth to play a key role in the structuring and development of Afghanistan. I recognize that this will probably take decades; however, and in the words of Mahatma Ghandi:

“No culture can live if it attempts to be exclusive”.

Thank you.