COUNTRY STUDY
OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL GENDER AND
(WHEAT-BASED) LIVELIHOOD LITERATURE
AFGHANISTAN

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Abstract

This review provides a synthesis of the literature on the links between gender and social relationships, livelihood choices, and wheat-based systems in Afghanistan. Afghanistan’s recent history has been marked by extreme hardship and violence. The war economy has brought about a profound transformation in social relations and has dramatically undermined a rural economy based on subsistence agriculture and pastoralism. This scenario raises the complex issue of how to promote social cohesion and achieve land-based food security in a society devastated by suffering and loss.

The introduction contrasts optimistic accounts about farming systems and livelihood options with a growing body of literature that clearly highlights a loss of confidence in farming as a means to generate a livelihood. The livelihoods that exist now are a result of the history of conflict and drought. Conflict and drought have required households to implement flexible coping approaches. For a majority of poor households, non-farm labor, rather than agriculture, is the most important source of income. This has major ramifications for agricultural policy and programming, as it demonstrates that the needs of the rural poor are currently being missed due to the predominant (and misleading) focus on agriculture.

With regard to development and empowerment, the literature shows that the process of reconstruction must take into consideration the gender dimension when serving the needs of women and men. Which are the areas where there is great potential to engage women and men? Which are the structures and narratives, both at the national and international level, that set out the constraints within which women and men must live their lives? Do those same structures also shape the possibilities for change and the form that this change is likely to take? Different framings of Afghan gender roles are juxtaposed and compared to highlight the complexities and negotiations that engage both genders in the process of decision-making.

Given the present conditions of life in Afghanistan, punctuated by chronic crises and weak governance, religion and family may be perceived as the only force able to reinstate a sense of nationhood, solidarity between fellow citizens, and economic and political empowerment. In the fragmented landscapes of Afghanistan, the opportunities are limited, especially for the poor, and the need for income diversification is acute. This literature review shows that not enough is known of the extent to which men and women are able to access different livelihood opportunities, or the extent to which programs may impact on women and men differently. The references reviewed converge, however, when drawing attention to the diversity of livelihood strategies at inter- and intrahousehold levels, seeing this as a meaningful entry point into the processes of reconstruction, change, and resilience, and raising questions about assumptions linking agricultural growth, poverty reduction, and promotion of gender equality. In this highly complex politicized setting, it is crucial that strategies be explored with a view to supporting household livelihood diversification, rather than trying to move households to agriculture entirely.
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1. Introduction

The aim of this literature review is to investigate social relationships in wheat-growing regions of Afghanistan. Key research questions being addressed are:

- How does the world look, and work, for males and females in wheat-growing households?
- What do we know about social relationships and mediating processes\(^1\) that exist in the prime wheat-growing regions in Afghanistan?
- How do gender relations shape livelihood choices, including nutrition, food security, and agriculture?

In order to deliver this output a desk-based review of literature (both peer-reviewed and secondary/gray/unpublished) was conducted using databases Google Scholar, ProQuest, JSTOR, SAGE Journals, Taylor & Francis Online, and Wiley Online Library. The search terms used in combination with “Afghanistan,” “gender,” and “wheat” were:

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\(^1\) Mediating processes are formal and informal organizations and institutions with “regularized practices (or patterns of behavior) structured by rules and norms of societies which have persistent and widespread use” (Scoones 1998, 12).
1.1. A Rentier State: Mixed Systems in Fractured Lands

Afghanistan has long been a key target for economic, political, or territorial expansion from larger and often more powerful states. Mid-20th-century Afghanistan has been defined as a rentier state due to its reliance on foreign revenues/subsidies, lack of a thriving locally generated economic structure, and relatively weak engagement with society. The “traditionalism” and “localism” attributed to the Afghan polity, far from being survivals of ancient traditions, are instead partially result of the country’s particular mode of integration into the contemporary state system. There is no moral discourse of statehood shared by the majority of its citizens. Attempts at modernization, including reforms affecting the status of women, always emanated from an urban-based state elite trying to consolidate its control over a fractious periphery. Repeated failures must be placed in the context of state-society relations. The state is seen as external and predatory, as a coercive apparatus that oppresses local communities through its corrupt bureaucracy (Kandiyoti 2007, 172; Fluri 2011, 520).

In a country like Afghanistan, which has the world’s highest number of mines per capita and whose recent history has been marked by extreme hardship and violence, it is likely to become more difficult to achieve land-based food security in the future (Kantor and Pain 2011). The war economy that has arisen since the Taliban seized power, and since the US/UK invasion of 2001 has changed social relations and the country from one that had a predominantly rural economy based on subsistence agriculture and pastoralism into the world’s largest producer of opium and a centre for arms dealing and smuggling, whose criminalized economy has funded local warlords and the Taliban (Kandiyoti 2007, 176). This scenario raises the complex issue of how to promote social cohesion and achieve land-based food security in a society devastated by suffering and loss: what really matters for living a dignified and moral life amidst uncertainty and danger?

Unproblematic accounts about farming systems and livelihood options in Afghanistan—which provide figures such as more than 85% of the population depend on agriculture for their livelihood (Tavva et al. 2013, 113)—are contrasted by a growing body of literature asserting that there is currently little acknowledgment on the part of either the government or the international community that social context matters, a fact reflected in the limited resources devoted to social analysis in existing policy or programming. His means that the attention given to poverty reduction or food security tends to focus on technically oriented efforts to deliver access without reflection on how local social environments may limit or distort them. This technical approach risks delivering development programs that reinforce existing inequalities and grievances related to the distribution of aid. There is sharp disagreement among researchers over the extent to which rural Afghan livelihoods have gravitated from subsistence agriculture to commercial production and the pursuit of diverse livelihood strategies, and what long-term effects this has had on cash crop production. Furthermore, research in Afghanistan shows that it is often unclear how farmers alter their agricultural practices to cope with conflict and if these are short-term coping strategies or long-term adaptive behaviors (Gilmour 2007, 17).

In the literature, there is an “optimistic” perspective that identifies three farming systems in Afghanistan: mixed crop-livestock, agro-pastoral, and pastoral or nomadic systems. Poverty, worsened by climate change (drought and low and erratic rainfall), has forced many people to rely largely on livestock rearing in the mixed crop-livestock farming system. Wheat is the main food crop, accounting for more than three-quarters of food grain production. Livestock includes cattle, goats, sheep, donkeys, poultry, horses, and camels. Goats are an essential element in mixed crop-livestock farming (Tavva et al. 2013, 116–17).
Wheat is by far the major staple crop produced in Afghanistan. Approximately 60 to 70 percent of the total crop area of the country is planted with wheat, yet the country must import wheat from Pakistan to meet its food security needs (Chabot and Dorosh 2007). Afghanistan is one of the world’s highest per-capita wheat consumers (World Bank 2014). Wheat supplies about 60 percent of an average Afghan’s caloric intake (Persaud 2012). Wheat is therefore important to the nation’s food security and nutrition.

Farmers also grow several types of summer and winter vegetables and fruits, such as potatoes, onions, tomatoes, okra, cauliflower, melons, watermelons, apricots, almonds, pomegranates, apples, and grapes. Generally, it was found that the key challenges faced by the vast majority of Afghan farmers were smaller land plots, water shortages due to poor irrigation systems and lack of rainwater, insufficient access to credit, minimal mechanization, insufficient outreach in agricultural and veterinary extension services, and poor accessibility to markets and other communities. These challenges were exacerbated by the ongoing and persistent conflict in many areas of the country (Mihran 2011, 24–28).

The “skeptical” perspective in the literature, highlights a loss of confidence in farming. Livelihood security is critical in a war-torn country that has undergone a major drought in recent years, and where irrigation systems for agriculture, the mainstay for a majority, have been destroyed. Combined with the human losses they had suffered, there were reports of many Afghans trickling back to their villages to find their houses looted and demolished. With few livelihood choices in a war economy, where increased opium production under the Karzai government and weapons dealing seemed to be the only market options, it is no surprise that many affected Afghans slid into depression.

The skeptical perspective strongly contests the common view that agriculture is the main source of livelihood for Afghans. Conflict and drought have required households to implement flexible coping approaches such as there is migration to urban areas to find non-farming work (Gilmour 2007, 15–17). Livelihoods in Afghanistan for rural areas were found to be diverse and often derived from multiple sources (Pain and Lautze 2002). Most Afghan households had varied income sources, with the average household having between three to six sources. Accumulation of wealth was what wealthier families did, while poor households pursued diverse livelihood options as a coping device (Grace and Pain 2004).

The majority of poor households obtained most of their grain from the market and other sources rather than household production. Non-farm labor, not agriculture, was their most important source of income for these households. This suggests that the accuracy of the frequently cited statistic of 80% of the population being dependent on agriculture is questionable (Grace and Pain 2004, 3). These findings have major ramifications for agricultural policy and programming, as they

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2 A qualitative study conducted in the Balkh, Herat, and Nangarhar provinces describes how daily dietary components for a rural household consisted of mainly carbohydrates from rice, potatoes, pulses, and wheat, and vegetable or animal fat used with onions and garlic in meal preparation. When in season, this dietary base was supplemented with vegetables such as spinach, tomatoes, and eggplants. Families that raised chickens added eggs to their diet. Except for special occasions, very little meat was consumed due to scarcity and the prohibitive cost. Poorer families often had bread and sweetened tea for most of their meals. Subsistence farming for these ingredients was dependent on rainfall or access to water. In years with inadequate access to water, ingredients needed to be purchased. However, without income from sources other than the meager agricultural produce in good years, the foodstuffs available on the market were unaffordable for the vast majority of poorer rural households. Evidence from the study sites suggests that even tightly knit families were disintegrating due to persistent changes in weather patterns, causing a breakdown of the link between livelihood and agriculture. A number of the women interviewed at the study sites worried that food shortages driven by climate change would force many families into selling their young daughters into marriages so that the dowry could be used as a source of temporary financial relief (Mihran 2011).
demonstrate that the needs of the rural poor are currently being missed due to the predominant (and misleading) focus on agriculture. Does that contested statistic refer to 80% of Afghanistan’s entire population or just its rural population? What does “dependent” mean? Is it a direct or indirect dependence? Is it a total or partial dependence? Is it uniform dependence or differentiated by location, class, or gender?

Implementing development projects that target women is particularly challenging in a country that struggles with security and has major infrastructure deficiencies. Furthermore, the marginalization of women limits the quality, rate and focus of development. Oftentimes, the need to focus on the lack of security and failed infrastructure detracts from the capacity of individuals, communities, and organizations to invest in the future (Wilcox et al. 2014, 6). The literature on development and empowerment in Afghanistan shows that the process of reconstruction must take into consideration the gender dimension when serving the needs of women and men. Which are the areas where there is great potential to engage men and women? Which are the structures and narratives, both at the national and international level, that set out the constraints within which women and men must live their lives? Do those same structures also shape the possibilities for change and the form that this change is likely to take? As Kandiyoti (2007) argues, reducing the treatment of women and their lack of rights in Afghanistan to a form of cultural and institutionalized patriarchy masks the entrenched and caustic effects of insecurity and poverty. Moreover, the geopolitical framings of Afghan women as the targeted subjects of gender-focused development and modernization efforts regularly occur without a clear or consistent understanding of the contextual aspects of gender relations (Fluri 2011, 521). As Kabeer and Khan point out, “While we agree that the concept of empowerment lends itself to many different interpretations ... we would argue that in highly restrictive patriarchal societies like Afghanistan, it needs to be conceptualized in ways that capture the subtle shifts in consciousness, the incremental changes in agency that are likely to signify some shift in underlying power relations—even if these changes fall well short of ‘liberating women from the chains of gender oppression’” (2014, 6).

1.2. The Geopolitical Framings of Afghan Men and Women

In a country where autonomy is articulated in the language of honor and around gendered ideals of personal integrity, gender deserves extensive discussion and discerning analysis. The household represents a space of security for and control over women, and generally a woman’s position within her family relates to her social status or namus (face/honor). This honor functions through her role as a wife and mother, which is often more important than other contributions to the family, such as paid labor.

3 “Attempting to read off gender relations from state policies and legal frameworks remains a limited exercise in contexts where central governance apparatuses have restricted reach and the vast majority of women have little contact with state, markets and civil society organizations. Women’s life options are primarily conditioned by the fortunes of the communities and households in which their livelihoods and everyday lives are embedded. It is, therefore, to these contexts that one must turn for a more realistic appraisal of the opportunities and constraints they face” (Kandiyoti 2007, 176).

4 “The most immediate need of women, men, and children in Afghanistan today is for economic reconstruction. However, as the findings of this research demonstrate, the gender dimension is also crucial in this process. Women experienced war and violent conflict differently from men. Their secret organizations empowered many women; creating networks of trust and reciprocity in their neighborhoods, among their friends and relatives, and also within their communities. To ignore women and their organizations in the process of reconstruction would deny women in Afghanistan the right to rebuild and solidify their new reality” (Povey 2004, 185–86).

5 “Ethnicity, education level, family status, and kinship networks at home and in the community complicate women’s gender identity, position, and authority. Women’s power and decision-making also vary considerably over their lifetime. For example, older women who have built up social and kinship networks over time gain more authority and influence than they had as younger women (Fluri 2011, 521).
Ahmed-Ghosh (2003) chronicles the history of women in Afghanistan and specifically highlights the importance of rural Afghanistan in the shaping of the nation and how it views the status of women. Women are not an isolated group; their fate is entwined with and determined by historical, political, social, economic, and religious forces. In addition to a range of internal tensions, international political forces have impacted Afghanistan in the sense of promoting women’s rights and exacerbated existing internal tensions. Moreover, Afghanistan has always had elite and middle-class women who have asserted their rights and marched towards modernization. Despite these examples, most Afghan women in rural areas have been oppressed through tribal customs and dictates. Over the last century, attempts by the urban elite or foreign influencers to improve the living conditions and rights of women have been consistently resisted by Afghan men.

The status of women in Afghanistan has long been a divisive political issue, and it continues to be so in the present. As the historical record indicates, women’s rights have undergone periods of reform followed by violent backlash and curtailment (Kandiyoti 2007). Zulfacar (2006) refers to this cycle as the “pendulum of gender politics in Afghanistan.” Whether the regime was severely restrictive or sought to improve the condition of women, there was one common factor—the involvement or influence of foreign countries, typically Western nations.

Contemporary Afghanistan is situated in what the demographer Caldwell (1982) called the “patriarchal belt” and represents an extreme case of what Kandiyoti (1988) terms “classic patriarchy.” The patriarchal extended family is the central social unit within which the senior man has authority over everyone else in the family, including the younger men. Women are subject to forms of control and subordination that include restrictive codes of behavior, gender segregation, and the association of female virtue with family honor (Moghadam 2002, 20). In light of this rigid social structure, countries seeking power in Afghanistan have championed the cause of freeing women from tribal customary norms. The stated intention may have been to improve the lives of Afghan women, but several authors contend that this was only a pretext. The real intentions were to undermine the control of Afghan men, who are the sole decision-makers in the family and in political life and destabilize their communities. Typical tactics have been military interventions combined with social upheaval (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003; Zulfacar 2006).

It comes, therefore, as no surprise that female education and veiling—part of the general fixation on the plight of Muslim women and their need to be “saved” or “liberated”—have perennially been powerful and explosive issues. This resulted in several sociopolitical and economic projects that attempted to “modernize” women as symbolic representations of “progress,” which remained geographically limited to the capital city’s urban educated elite. Indeed, the rights and visibility of women are a unifying theme throughout various phases of modernization in the twentieth century despite disparate strategies, leadership, and international influences (Hirschkind and Mahmood 2002, 352–53).

Several articles discuss the different and contradictory meanings attached to women’s veiling practices and dissimulation strategies, and underline the complex ways in which women are attempting to become legitimate actors in the public sphere: Where and when are women using veiling and for what purposes? Who are the women who are not wearing the veil? How is the
decision to wear or not to wear the veil interpreted in public spaces? Crucially, the corporeal has represented, and continues to represent, a key site onto which, and through which, conceptualizations of ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition’ are enacted in contemporary Afghanistan (Abu-Lughod 2002; Billaud 2009; Fluri 2009; Kandiyoti 2007; Khattak 2004; Moghadam 2002; Povey 2004). There is a rich body of anthropological and feminist literature showing that when traditional/existing Afghan gender roles are interpreted as backward the observer is ignoring their functional role, especially in the rural social system. This oversimplification of gender roles has contributed to the overall misrepresentation of “Third World women.” The strong link between the micro-domestic household affairs and macrosocial dynamics of a highly tribal and patriarchal society has been totally underestimated. The sense of loyalty among women toward their tribe, household, and community has always transcended the national liberation agenda for women. These women do not perceive themselves as a collective political entity with united interests beyond family and tribe or ethnic group.

The endeavor to empower women has usually lacked the essential grassroots relevance that would be necessary to instigate a larger social movement (Zulfacar 2006, 38). According to Kabeer and Khan (2014, 3), those who view Afghanistan through a Western feminist prism tend to take women’s absence from the public domain as evidence of their subordinate status, overlooking the private domain of family and kinship where Afghan women exercise most influence. Consequently, these observers fail to account for the claims and obligations that underpin women’s influence within the family as well as the important role of patriarchy in providing them with shelter, status, and security. According to this perspective, and regardless of differences in ethnicity, location, and class, women’s roles as wives and mothers are central to their identity and take primacy over other possible roles.

Others see family and kinship relationships as simultaneously the key source of women’s well-being and security as well as the primary structure of their oppression (Blumberg 2015; Maletta 2008). Ahmed-Ghosh (2006) argues that the so-called complementarity of gender roles in Afghan society disguises women’s extreme economic dependence on men in the household and their inability to speak and act on their own behalf. She argues strongly in favor of women’s economic empowerment through education and employment premised on a discourse of basic rights. Moghadam (2002) similarly questions the benign view of women’s status within the family. She points out that within the patriarchal culture of Afghan society women may indeed be honored as mothers, but this is primarily as mothers of sons. She strongly rejects the politics of cultural

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6 “Twenty years ago, the anthropologist Hanna Papanek (1982), who worked in Pakistan, described the burqa as ‘portable seclusion,’” observed Abu-Lughod (2002).

She [Papanek] noted that many saw it as a liberating invention because it enabled women to move out of segregated living spaces while still observing the basic moral requirements of separating and protecting women from unrelated men. Ever since I came across her phrase “portable seclusion,” I have thought of these enveloping robes as “mobile homes.” Everywhere, such veiling signifies belonging to a particular community and participating in a moral way of life in which families are paramount in the organization of communities and the home is associated with the sanctity of women.

The obvious question that follows is this: If this were the case, why would women suddenly become immodest? Why would they suddenly throw off the markers of their respectability, markers, whether burqas or other forms of cover, which were supposed to assure their protection in the public sphere from the harassment of strange men by symbolically signalling to all that they were still in the inviolable space of their homes, even though moving in the public realm? Especially when these are forms of dress that had become so conventional that most women gave little thought to their meaning. (785)

7 “I use the term corporeal modernity to identify the use of the body as a gendered public space and site of socio-political representation. Corporeal modernity also provides a place for illustrating or expressing secularized ‘western’ ideals of liberation and freedom ... For example, the burqa came to symbolize the Taliban’s oppressive treatment of women and was discursively positioned as the antithesis of US female corporeality. Clothing considered acceptable dress in Afghanistan, as highlighted by several participants in this study (both international and Afghan), became a symbol of on-the-ground acceptance or rejection of ‘US-modernity’” (Fluri 2011, 523).
relativism and calls for a transnational feminist politics unified around basic rights to education, income, and reproductive choice. However, it is not only the strength of their material stake in the system that has kept women locked into a subordinate position. It is also the fact that both men and women develop their sense of selfhood and social identity through the enactment—and internalization—of familial discourses that construct dominant norms of masculinity and femininity in terms that stress their mutual, though highly asymmetrical, interdependence. These give rise to an understanding of claims and obligations that are generated through, and embedded within, the social relationships of kinship, family, and community (Kabeer and Khan 2014, 5).

This literature review juxtaposes and compares these different framings of Afghan gender roles and draws further attention to the controversial concept of personhood as expressed in terms of local perceptions and understanding. “Can there be a liberation that is Islamic? And, beyond this, is liberation even a goal for which all women or people strive? Are emancipation, equality, and rights part of a universal language we must use?” (Abu-Lughod 2002, 788). The issue of Afghan manhood is equally confounding, yet far less surveyed. Most of the available research on the subject has in fact been conducted by women researchers studying women’s issues from a woman’s perspective. Researching the ideas of Afghan men is still a relatively rare phenomenon.

Dupree (2004, 326–29) recounts in traditional Afghan culture, and in Islam, the wife’s right to maintenance is in consideration of her submission to her husband’s authority. When she becomes economically self-sufficient, or even takes over the economic sustenance of the entire family, this premise is naturally challenged. Male expectations of total obedience are thus eroded, while women who once accepted diminishment in exchange for security no longer need to do so. Afghan women at all levels have taken on additional economic responsibilities; furthermore, aid programs have devoted much effort to women’s rights messages. The circumstances created by modernization, the socialist experiment, conflict and refugee experiences have given women in Afghanistan more strength, sometimes deliberately through political processes, sometimes unintentionally through economic necessity. Young men, on the other hand, were deprived of an education when they went off to fight and are now neither intellectually nor emotionally prepared to enter into meaningful, productive activities. Disabled men and those unable to find jobs must face the fact that they can no longer command the authority they once took for granted within their families. Women need not be so passive, and men must seek new identities. Many Afghan folktales celebrate strong women as long as they keep their chastity, but when a woman steps forward to take on male roles, this impinges on a man’s sense of manliness.

Bahri (2014) found that gender equality programming typically concentrated on women’s empowerment, without addressing the sensibilities, point of view, or conditioning of the Afghan men. Masculinity, to these men, is expressed by the power men embody and the roles they enact in accordance with Islam as providers of the family, heads and decision-makers of the family, protectors of women, and occupiers of public space. What happens to the dignity of men during a long period of extreme violence and oppression? Men may feel emasculated because women are more self-sufficient. Gilani (2008) confirms that, although more international media coverage and zeal has been devoted to the plight of Afghan women during the rule of the Taliban, it is important to note that Afghan men were also frequently made targets of Taliban-initiated violence. In a culture where men are constructed as being vital to the public sphere, and the capacity to govern is considered a measure of manliness, the extreme experiences of violence coupled with the near inability of the majority of Afghan men to be involved in the political process has resulted in the erosion of feelings of masculinity among Afghan men. This presents a further challenge to the rights of women in Afghanistan. Gilani argues that, because the traditional means by which masculinity is asserted are virtually absent or severely restricted within Afghanistan, men will reassert their masculinity through the only means they have observed to be effective in at least the
last two decades—violence, which, at least in the private sphere, will most often take the form of violence directed against women.

The post-9/11 international interventions in Afghanistan focused on women—not gender—and their public and political participation. These interventions did not address, or did not understand, the complexities of Afghan gender roles and relations. For example, they tended to neglect or deny that the family and household remained a centrally important space for Afghan social life. The domestic space of family life provides several spatially and socially distinct challenges and opportunities for women, which not only vary considerably by ethnic group, location, religious belief, and education level, but also vary household to household when these social indices are similar (Fluri 2011, 521).

This literature reviews calls for in-depth analysis of household internal dynamics in Afghanistan. This is needed to illuminate the complexities and negotiations that engage both genders in the decision-making process—be it in relation to life within marriage, income-generating activities, gendered divisions of labor, distribution of goods, or ways of building and keeping consensus on key decisions.

2. Annotated Bibliography

2.1. Afghan women, salvation, colonialism


Drawing from relevant secondary sources and first-hand observations and interviews in Kabul in early 1989, this article analyzes the extreme situation of Afghan women under the Taliban by casting a historical and sociological lens to highlight (a) the patriarchal nature of gender and social relations, deeply embedded in Afghanistan’s traditional and fragmented ethnic-based society, and (b) the existence of a weak central state, which has been unable to implement modernizing programs and goals in the face of Afghanistan’s tribal feudalism, especially among the Pashtuns. A patriarchal social structure and the absence of a centralized and modernizing state, along with the problematical stance of the international (and feminist) community during the critical years of the 1980s and early 1990s, resulted in an extreme form of social exclusion: Afghan women were banned from participation and decision-making, and from the public space itself.

Unlike the mujahedeen’s Islamic State of Afghanistan, which was weak and chaotic, the Taliban’s Islamic state became strong, unified, and centralized, with the capacity to carry out its peculiar interpretation of Islam and institutionalize the subordination and subjugation of women. Taliban enforcement of the new rules regarding compulsory veiling was brutal. Clearly the Taliban instituted the harshest and most bizarre theocratic dictatorship in the world, with a gender regime that was particularly severe on women. But the Taliban did not arise out of nowhere. The author stresses the role and responsibility of the U.S. (as well as Pakistan, Iran, and Saudi Arabia) in the subversion of a reformist, modernizing regime and the human rights tragedy that followed.

8 “The women in our study did not experience ‘Afghan culture’ as a static and internally coherent system that lay outside the realm of contestation, but as the lived relationships of everyday life that had to be negotiated on a daily basis from highly unequal positions. The various upheavals that have characterized Afghan history in recent decades and the efforts of successive regimes to impose their own, often conflicting, models of gender relations on the Afghan population provide the backdrop against which these negotiations are being carried out” (Kabeer and Khan 2014, 21).
Furthermore, the article makes reference to the fact that international feminists, and especially the Feminist Majority in the U.S., became quite vociferous in their denunciation of the Taliban after 1996 but it was strangely silent during the 1980s and early 1990s.

The author argues that the concepts of public space and private space are perhaps nowhere more relevant than in Afghanistan, where women’s access to public space has long been politicized, contested, and denied. Fundamentalists seek, among other things, to redefine the boundaries between the public and private and to put women “in their place,” partly to reinforce their control over women’s sexuality and partly to reinforce male ownership over the means of production. In the author’s view, gender-segregated social worlds (like racially segregated social worlds) have to be seen as a severe limitation, an expression of unequal power, an indication of exclusion, and a form of social control by men over women. It cannot be denied that males in patriarchal societies such as Afghanistan continue to control not only their female relatives’ access to public space, but also the access of women as a social group.


Rallying against the Taliban to protest their policies against Afghan women provided a point of unity for groups from a range of political perspectives in the US: from conservatives to liberals and radicals, from Republicans to Democrats, and from Hollywood glitterati to grassroots activists. Among the key factors that facilitated this remarkable consensus, there are two in particular that this article explores: the studied silence about the crucial role the U.S. had played in creating the miserable conditions under which Afghan women were living; and secondly, a whole set of questionable assumptions, anxieties, and prejudices embedded in the notion of Islamic fundamentalism. It is striking, the authors argue, that even among many of those who came to acknowledge the U.S.’s involvement in the civil war in Afghanistan, the convenient/expedient narrative of women’s oppression, Taliban evil, and Islamic fundamentalism remained largely unchallenged.

The American policy of promoting extremist Islamic groups in the region, and equipping them with sophisticated weapons and intelligence, had gradually, over a period of ten years, created a political climate within which the emergence of the Taliban was a predictable outcome. The region was turned into one of the most heavily armed areas in the world. Yet Feminist Majority statements consistently ignored the devastation wrought by two decades of warfare, in which women and children had suffered most heavily, and instead suggested a relatively benign picture of women’s lives prior to Taliban rule. The narrow focus on Taliban rule by the Feminist Majority and other groups, and its silence over the channeling of U.S. aid to the most brutal and violent Afghan groups (of which the Taliban were only one), must be seen as a dangerous simplification of a vastly more complicated problem. Conditions of war, militarization, and starvation were considered to be less injurious to women than the lack of education and employment.

Equally relevant is the fact that even though Taliban policies had made conditions much worse for urban women, they did not substantially affect the lives of the vast majority of rural women. For example, an article published in the *New Yorker* noted that just outside of the urban centers, “One sees raised paths sub-dividing wheat fields ... in which men and women work together and the women rarely wear the burqa; indeed, since they are sweating and stooping so much, their heads remain uncovered. The Taliban has scarcely altered the lives of uneducated women, except to make them almost entirely safe from rape.” Despite the availability of this kind of data, the
Feminist Majority and other advocacy groups carefully kept any ambiguities out of their case against the Taliban as the sole perpetrators of the ills committed against Afghan women.

The authors highlight the degree to which the normative subject of feminism remains about liberty: one who contests social norms, but not one who finds purpose, value, and pride in the struggle to live in accord with certain tradition sanctioned virtues. Thus, a Muslim woman can only be one of two things, either uncovered, and therefore liberated, or veiled, and thus still, to some degree, subordinate. The authors urge the reader to find a way to think about the lives of Muslim women outside this simple opposition.


In the 1920s women appeared in French style attire on the streets. In the 1930s, women were prohibited to appear unveiled. In the 1950s, to appear unveiled became a choice and education was co-ed. In the 1960s and 1970s, some women worked with men, drove cars and sported mini-skirts. In the 1980s, some women danced in clubs, some worked in factories and the dowry was outlawed. In the 1990s, women were forced to take refuge in the veil from rival ethnic attacks. Thousands of women were abused and raped. For their “protection,” in the late 1990s, the Taliban outlawed the public appearance of women and prohibited them from participation in every aspect of public life. In 2003, female students again may appear unveiled on the university campus but remain veiled out of campus for security concerns. Over all of these years, gender policies have swung like a pendulum, oscillating between the moderate and the extreme. Furthermore, all of the above were taking place in Kabul only—other conditions prevailed elsewhere in Afghanistan. (27)

By reviewing previous Afghan gender politics, this article argues that Afghanistan is in dire need of a national gender policy developed with the involvement of women in the decision-making processes, both from top-down governing bodies and with bottom-up local rural participation. Rather than any centrally developed initiative concerning women evolving into a widely adopted national policy, successive governments’ policies have instead swung back and forth between progressive and reactionary, with little impact at the village level where most people live. Successive Afghan governments have used women, or the idea of women, as pawns for political legitimization. None of the government policies, either progressive or reactionary, have been responsive to the immediate needs of the majority of Afghan women, who live in rural areas. Instead, the focus of gender policies has been on urban Afghan women who constitute less than 10% of the total population. For the most part, the implementation of a “modern” secular educational system marginalized even further the majority of rural women in Afghanistan.

The issue of gender has been used to serve the centralized state’s larger political agendas, rather than to meet the basic needs of the majority of women. It is true that in both the 1964 and 1977 Afghan constitutions, women and men were recognized as equal before the law and women were given equal rights and privileges, but in practice patriarchy and tribal social conduct have continued to dominate gender relationships.

This article highlights how the gender politics of successive Afghan governments up to 2006 have failed to initiate reality-based policies that respond to the actual needs of the majority of women. The historical failure of state-initiated gender policies stems from the disconnect between these policies— instituted by succeeding male dominant governments—and social reality. The lack of a full understanding of the needs of the populace and a neglect of the kin-ordered and subsistence-
household rural economy have led to the continued failure of “imposed” centralized gender policies. For the majority of women living in rural parts of the country, their immediate need is to increase daily productivity. The role of women in the socio-economic structure of Afghan society has its roots in the country’s kin-ordered subsistence household economy. The enforcement of any form of external gender-related program, decree, and initiative without paying attention to lessons of the past or to present changes in economic need and infrastructure (or lack of change) will lead to further opposition, resistance, and, ultimately, failure.


This article explores the ethics of the “War on Terrorism,” asking whether anthropology, the discipline devoted to understanding and dealing with cultural difference, can provide us with critical purchase on the justifications made for American intervention in Afghanistan, which are framed in terms of liberating, or saving, Afghan women. Afghan women have, in fact, become mobilized as female symbols in the “war on terror”. Yet, the author argues, projects that involve saving other women depend on and reinforce a sense of superiority by Westerners, a form of arrogance that deserves to be challenged.

The author looks first at the dangers of reifying culture, apparent in the tendencies of Westerners in general to plaster neat cultural icons like “the Muslim woman” over messy historical and political dynamics (such as policies organized around oil interests, the arms industry, and the international drug trade). Then, calling attention to how contemporary discourses on equality, freedom, and rights resonate with earlier colonial and missionary rhetoric on Muslim women, the author argues that we need to develop, instead, a serious appreciation of the differences among women in the world: different histories, expressions of different circumstances, and manifestations of differently structured desires. Further, she argues that rather than seeking to “save” other women (with the superiority it implies and the violence it would entail) Westerners might better think in terms of (a) working with Afghan women in situations subject to historical transformation and (b) owning up to their involvement in creating global injustices all the while hiding behind the language of liberation. The author strongly endorses the use of a more egalitarian language of alliances, coalitions, and solidarity, instead of salvation.

The author develops many of these arguments about the limits of “cultural relativism” through a consideration of the burqa and the many meanings of veiling in the Muslim world. It is common popular knowledge that the ultimate sign of the oppression of Afghan women under the “Taliban-and-the-terrorists” is that they were forced to wear the burqa. Yet, even though Afghanistan was liberated from the Taliban, women did not seem to throw off their burqas. Why was that so? The author points out that the Taliban did not invent the burqa; it was the local form of covering that Pashtun women in one region wore when they went out. The Pashtun are one of several ethnic groups in Afghanistan and the burqa was one of many forms of covering in the subcontinent and southwest Asia that has developed as a convention for symbolizing women’s modesty or respectability. In many settings, the burqa, like some other forms of cover, marks the symbolic separation of men’s and women’s spheres, part of the general association of women with family and home, as opposed to the public space where strangers mingle.

This article shows that there many forms of covering, which have different meanings in the communities in which they are used. Veiling itself must not be confused with, or made to stand for, lack of agency. For example, women decide for whom they feel it is appropriate to veil.
Moreover, the modern Islamic modest dress that many educated women across the Muslim world have taken on since the mid-1970s now both publicly marks piety and can be read as a sign of educated urban sophistication, a type of modernity. The author urges us to work against the reductive interpretation of veiling as the quintessential sign of women’s unfreedom.


This article traces the history of women in Afghanistan for three main reasons: one, to show that they were not always oppressed by fundamentalism as occurred under the mujahedeen and the Taliban; two, to show that women’s issues were an integral part of national construction agendas even as early as the 1920s; three, to highlight the power of tribal/community leaders in defining the role of women and in successfully resisting any modernization that would challenge their patriarchal authority. The focus is on the importance of rural Afghanistan in shaping the nation and women’s status therein. Throughout the history of Afghanistan, women who were publicly visible belonged to the royalty or elite and represented a very tiny proportion of the country. In rural Afghanistan, control over the lives and gender roles of women is determined by patriarchal kinship arrangements. These kinship relationships are derived from the Quran and tribal traditions where men exercise unmitigated power over women. While Islam is deeply entrenched in the country, the author proposes a compromise involving the hybridization of Islamic and secular ideals of gender relations in combination with the economic reconstruction of rural as a process that could enhance women’s status.

According to the author, ethnically based rivalries, combined with open and varied interpretations of Islam, had created a fractious culture. The impact on women had been especially harsh, since women’s lives had often been used as the raw material with which to establish ethnic prominence. Tribal laws and sanctions had routinely taken precedence over Islamic and constitutional laws in deciding gender roles, especially through kinship hierarchies in rural regions. The author argues that, in 2003, Afghanistan’s economic marginalization, social disorder, and political dislocation can be conceptualized as “deficiencies” that women can maneuver to their advantage. Although economic reconstruction should be the primary aim, this reconstruction can be connected to wider social change and to building political democracy in ways that include women on new terms. In other words, Afghanistan’s economic bankruptcy creates opportunities to renegotiate the division of labor along gender lines.

Afghanistan has a history of progressive efforts toward women’s rights and developing the basis for a more egalitarian society. At the same time, this historical review brings to light the significance of the rural/urban divide in Afghanistan. While Kabul has historically been the cosmopolitan center and will continue to lead the push for modernization in the future, any economic development, the author argues, must also include changes in the power structures of rural regions. Such structural transformations are essential to the improvement of women’s status in Afghanistan and can only happen when the countryside becomes an integral part of Afghanistan’s new plans for economic development.

In the context of Afghanistan, women are predominantly portrayed as passive victims of war, violence, and political repression, to be liberated only by Western military intervention. Twenty-two years of war and violent conflict eroded social capital in Afghanistan. However, women in Afghanistan organized around gender-related survival strategies and, in the process, became more aware of gender-specific concerns. They worked together in groups and organizations, generating networks, norms, and trust in their communities.

This article is based on qualitative participatory research, principally involving six days of detailed observational study and 19 interviews, consisting of 11 individual interviews and 8 group ones with 123 women and 3 men. This approach enabled the author to ask questions that encouraged women to express their feelings and share their experiences. The author notes that the scope of the study was limited, due to her work being confined to six days in Kabul.

The author found that women, men, and children were suffering from malnutrition and various diseases. There were also specific health problems deriving from the prolonged period that has seen the country beset by several wars, both physical and psychological. Years of repression, deprivation, and dire socio-economic conditions had severely affected the mental well-being of most citizens. Many women had been subjected to rape, forced marriage, torture, killing, fear, domestic violence, social exclusion, and separation from their home and family members. Issues frequently mentioned by the interviewees concerned interfamilial violence against women; the isolation and marginalization of women-headed households; and men’s derogatory perceptions of women in society at large.

Women had nonetheless shown their capacity to devise ways of coping with life, even under the most extreme forms of coercion. Professional women had formed networks and groups in solidarity with poorer women. For over 20 years, these networks and forms of solidarity had become a mechanism for women’s empowerment. The levels of trust and support generated by these secret organizations could be measured by the widespread incidence of teaching in women’s homes and the support they gave each other to ensure the survival of these secret meetings. These women became an inspiration for other women, who risked their lives under Taliban rule to give cohesion and solidarity to their communities.

The author argues that the voices of women in Afghanistan, their views and demands, should be incorporated into and shape the agenda for reconstruction, rather than allowing the agenda to be set solely by facilitators, academics, and aid workers. The most immediate need of women, men, and children in 2004 is for economic reconstruction. However, as this research demonstrated, the gender dimension is also crucial in this process. The provision of resources and opportunities for women to tell and share their experiences as part of a healing process. Many women may not want to voice the truth about what they have had to go through for fear of wider personal and political reprisals, especially for sex workers in the context of Islamic law. But with the assistance of women’s organizations, women’s media, and NGOs, women could feel more empowered to break the taboos and thereby work towards changing gender relations at a deeper level.


This study is based on qualitative participatory research combined with oral history discourse and methodology. The research was conducted through the use of in-depth and extensive interviews in Afghanistan in 2002 and 2005 and in diasporic communities based in Iran and Pakistan in 2004 and 2005. The 20 men and 180 women the author interviewed believed that their life histories
were representative of many others. The article discusses how Afghan women exercised autonomy and agency both in the diaspora and in Afghanistan under U.S.-led invasion. Afghan women had invented different ways of coping with life while under the most extreme forms of coercion, fear, and uncertainty.

Many years of war and violent conflict created refugee communities and an Afghan diaspora, mainly in Iran and Pakistan. Despite living in fear and prejudice and experiencing loss of status, the majority of Afghan women endured these tough conditions to survive as refugees and as exiles. They learned leadership skills and community work. The exiled women came from diverse backgrounds in Afghanistan and they had the support of the women’s movement in Iran and NGOs in Pakistan. The author’s account shows that Afghan women moved between different worlds, languages, and jobs without being bound to a fixed location. They used the concept of khane be dosh (our homes on our shoulders) or sargardan (wanderer) to explain their feelings of nomadism.

Under the U.S.-led NATO invasion (2001–2006) these exiled women had been challenging the imperialist representation of Afghan women. On their return to Afghanistan they tried to rebuild their lives and renegotiate gender roles according to their own culture, but faced patriarchy, occupation, and lack of social structure and found their culture under attack from an alien regime. The author argues that there are similarities between women’s experiences under the Taliban and under the U.S.-led invasion. In both periods’ women felt alienated and had to strategize their coping mechanisms. In both periods they resisted and struggled against diverse forms of domination. This is important because the popular view, even in academic circles, portrays Afghan women as passive victims, waiting to be liberated by the West.


This article seeks to characterize new meanings associated with women’s veiling in an Islamic public space, drawing from observations, interviews, and field notes collected among various women’s groups in Afghanistan. It analyzes the public performances and personal experiences of those women Members of Parliament who entered the National Assembly in 2005.

The article argues that, while the chadari (or burqa, as the Western press miscalled it, using the Urdu denomination) has become the ultimate symbol of women’s oppression for Western audiences, it is necessary to take a closer look at chadari’s multiple and often contradictory uses and to contextualize the reasons for its persistence after the downfall of the Taliban regime.

The necessity to remain anonymous in public is closely related to the increasing level of public violence that women have experienced. Despite promises by the West to “liberate Afghan women,” and in spite of the presence of international troops on its soil, the Afghan state has been unable to protect women in their transition from the private to the public sphere. Ethnographic research demonstrates that women who are attempting to access public spaces have developed creative strategies of dissimulation, instead of exposure, as a safer strategy. The reluctance of women to remove their chadari is a good illustration of the long-lasting psychological effects of the mujahedeen and Taliban’s “technologies of power.” For many women, the chadari increased their mobility while guaranteeing their anonymity, a precious asset in a volatile and insecure environment. Women had become visible under the veil and were sometimes able to challenge gender hierarchies behind the appearance of compliance and conformity.
These findings challenge liberal ideas according to which women’s unveiled visibility in public spaces is a necessary guarantee for their emancipation and their agency. In the context of foreign military occupation and increased insecurity, control by the state of women’s appearance in public settings was to be understood as a means to assert sovereignty and to preserve a sense of national autonomy. As clothing had become the center of political attention, physical displays that did not strictly conform with the norm were perceived as potentially threatening to the social order. As in earlier colonial encounters, an area of cultural resistance developed around women’s bodies that constrain the modalities of women’s re-entry in the public sphere. As a result, women had been left with no other choice but to adapt and find alternative ways to make their voice heard. When protected from external gazes and able to see without being seen, women felt safe to occupy the public arena and make their voices heard. Their “absent presence” under the disciplinary monotony of the chadari enabled women to step into spaces formerly reserved by men. To some extent, women MPs had to renounce women’s issues and veil more strictly if they wanted to gain entry into mainstream politics.

The women the author interviewed and observed during her fieldwork were more invested in expressing pious identities via clothing than in cultivating virtuous selves. Veiling and clothing were part of an intricate strategy aimed at managing others’ impressions in the context of public interaction, where the presence of women was broadly considered as “abnormal.” Issues of religion and faith were not the main focus, even though all of these women were undeniably strong believers. This means, in practice, that veiling and bodywork in general are to be read as feminine performances destined to manage others’ impressions and not as mere acts of obedience to religious prescriptions.


There has been an ideological tug-of-war over women’s place in Afghan society from the early years of the twentieth century between the modernizing tendencies of its urban-based elite, the forces of conservatism represented by the Islamic ulema (religious leaders), and the country’s various tribal communities that are largely governed by their own customary laws. Following the U.S.-led invasion and the international donor community’s subsequent efforts to “develop” the country, this struggle has acquired a new lease of life. Current debates reproduce the now familiar divide between cultural values and universal rights that characterizes the wider feminist literature. ...

... This debate lies between those who believe that efforts to improve the position of women must be negotiated on the basis of local cultural values and those who believe that it must be grounded in the universality of women’s rights. (1–2)

Afghan women and men whose views on issues such as cultural values and universal rights are reported in recent studies tend to be those who are already politically active or prominent within development or women’s organizations in Afghanistan. Remarkably little is known about the views and values of the ordinary women (and men) who are the subject of these debates. It is this gap in the literature that this article seeks to address. Using the narratives of a small group of Afghan women from poorer urban households in Kabul, the article explores how they evaluate the changes that have taken place in Afghan society and where their views position them in the ongoing debates. These women are not representative of Afghan society, nor of its urban population. The sample is too small to yield findings that can be generalized to the rest of the population. Also, the women come from a particular socio-economic background and ethnic group: they are ethnic
Hazara women from lower-middle and working-class households. These interviews can therefore be seen as an in-depth exploration of complex issues from the point of view of a small and purposively selected sample of women and their families drawn from a community that lies outside the mainstream of Afghan society.

The descriptions of family life that emerged from the interviews conformed in many ways to the division of roles and responsibilities described in the literature on classic patriarchy. Men exercised authority, made key decisions, and managed family finances. While men often did the shopping for the household, neither fathers nor sons participated in domestic work. The men’s economic activities were far more diverse than those of women and entailed greater geographical mobility. The gender division of roles and responsibilities within the family was conceptualized by the women in this study in terms of an implicit patriarchal contract that spelled out mutual claims and obligations within the family. Men’s primary responsibilities for providing for the family and protecting its honor provided the rationale for their position of authority within the family, including decision-making power over their wives and children and the right to discipline them—with the use of violence if necessary. Very few women used the language of rights until questioned about it, and most offered a relational understanding of rights: the rights of family members in relation to each other conferred by religion, rather than the rights of citizens as defined by the state. Most perceived these rights to be asymmetrical; some appeared to accept this asymmetry, but there were dissenting voices.

One of the most striking findings that emerged from these interviews is the high level of physical violence that forms the backdrop to everyday life in the community. Along with references to violent outbreaks between men in the community, there were reports of mothers-in-law beating daughters-in-law, brothers beating sisters, parents beating their children, and, most frequently of all, husbands beating their wives. Men’s right to beat their wives appeared to be an accepted feature of the marital contract. Oftentimes, violence appeared to be bound up with the difficulty’s men were experiencing in carrying out their breadwinning roles because of disability, unemployment, or inadequate earnings.

However, not all the women in this small sample were equally resigned to the subordinate status assigned to them. The major upheavals of the past few decades, as well as current efforts to bring about change, had contributed to varying degrees of dissent on the part of some women. One major source of change was the large-scale displacement of the population as a result of consecutive wars and the associated urbanization of what had been a largely rural population. Six million Afghans, Hazaras among them, had fled to live in Iran or to the refugee camps of Pakistan. They did not return to their villages after the Taliban fell, but made their way to Kabul to seek a living in the urban economy. The view that “life was better in Iran” was a refrain that ran through many of their narratives. Iran offered greater security for life, livelihood, and standard of living and also better education and mobility for women.

Along with the restoration of earlier freedoms, the fall of the Taliban had seen a renewed focus on governance structures as part of the post-war reconstruction. An important aspect of this was the emergence of a formal legalistic discourse of gender equality and alternative jurisdictions to those of kinship and community. The women in this study had become aware of these changes through their social interactions as well as through the media. While the news and soap operas shown on TV exposed these women to other worlds and ways of living, it was also the medium through which they learned about competing discourses over rights and responsibilities.

What is noteworthy is that even within this small group, evaluations of Afghan culture vary widely. These women are thus likely to represent in microcosm what is happening elsewhere in their
Society: a growing diversity of views about the kind of society they want as both men and women become aware of diverse ways of organizing social life.


The institution of marriage is central to Afghan social life regardless of region, ethnicity, or kinship group. This report examines family dynamics and family violence in Afghanistan. It explores the many different ways in which marriages are decided on and practiced in Afghan families.

Data for this study, which is qualitative in nature, was collected between June 2006 and February 2007 in rural and urban areas of four provinces of Afghanistan: Bamyan, Herat, Kabul, and Nangarhar. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with over 200 men and women from 61 families.

A great deal of diversity was found among the ways in which decisions were made about marriages from family to family, as well as from sibling to sibling within individual families. The notions of choice and force figured prominently in the analysis of the data relating to marriage decisions and practices. This report argues that conceptualizing marriages as “forced” or “not forced” is an oversimplification of the way in which many marriages are decided upon. Instead, the report proposes that the way people enter into marriages operates along a range from choice to force. While some marriages may fall at one or other of the extreme ends of this range, many others feature elements of both choice and force.

Some existing stereotypes of Afghan men and women are challenged by the findings, such as that of the “vulnerable Afghan widow”: it was found that some of the most powerful women in families are, in fact, elderly widowed women. The stereotype of very young girls being forced into marriages perpetuates the myth that only girls are victims of forced marriage, when in fact many boys and men felt they were also forced into marriage, as did some older women. Furthermore, this report debunks the commonly held view that it is primarily wealthy men who practice polygamy: men from different wealth groups were found to often feel compelled by social norms or family pressures to take more than one wife.

Compliance with cultural norms and expectations led people to enter marriages that they knew may well present difficulties for them in the future. However, cultural norms and expectations for gendered behavior were not rigid and did not go unquestioned. This report demonstrates how frequently individual opinions and desires run counter to prevailing cultural norms and practices. The personal opinions of individuals, both women and men, were often more constructive, egalitarian, and forward-looking than the cultural norms and practices of the communities in which they lived. This divergence between cultural norms and personal desires shows that the practices adopted by individuals and communities are open to discussion and that there is a readiness for change, at least among some members.

In conclusion, it is essential that reports, policies, and programs disaggregate women and recognize the vast amount of diversity among the status of individual women in the family. It is also important to deconstruct stereotypes of Afghan women, and it should be recognized that Afghan men are also a highly heterogeneous group.
This article examines corporeal modernity as part of the larger “savior and liberation” trope produced for Afghan women by U.S.-led military, political, and economic intervention post-9/11. It adds to previous feminist critiques of U.S. intervention in Afghanistan by examining the Beauty Academy of Kabul and the participation of Miss Afghanistan in the 2003 Miss Earth Pageant as particular lenses through which the economic and corporeal “liberation” of Afghan women was presented in the U.S.

A content analysis of U.S.-based media coverage of the Beauty Academy of Kabul (consisting of documentary film, newspaper, and magazine articles) provided the basis for critiquing the way in which this project was framed in the U.S. The media articles were coded to identify how the use of makeup and beauty products was described for the reader. The 2004 documentary about the formation of the academy was transcribed and similarly coded. For the Miss Earth Pageant, the author conducted a content analysis of the pageant’s website and articles about the pageant in newspapers and the web-based journals. This data was juxtaposed with interviews with and observations of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) between 2003 and 2006, in Peshawar, Pakistan and Kabul, Afghanistan.

The article shows that the Beauty Academy of Kabul and the participation of Miss Afghanistan (sponsored by the U.S.) in the 2003 Miss Earth Pageant occupy an important chapter in socially and politically constructed Western ideologies for “saving” Afghan women. Afghan women’s bodies were unveiled in the beauty parlor in order to reveal feminine corporeal modernity as a significant, and at times “necessary,” link to Western ideals of freedom and liberty. Beauty pageant participation by Miss Afghanistan was similarly used to exemplify corporeal freedoms, despite the contests’ restrictions. After the removal of the Taliban from Kabul, Afghan women and men were released from many restrictions that had been imposed on them, including the ability to openly run beauty salons or shave one’s beard. However, linking beauty products to liberty as put forward [or espoused] by U.S. women and their beauty industry sponsors, or identifying a beauty pageant as an emblematic example of women’s rights, was mainly for the edification of audiences back in the U.S. The publicity the Beauty Academy of Kabul received in the U.S., despite the academy being a small and temporary limited project, reinforced the narrative of beauty as liberation in the minds of domestic U.S. consumers, not the Afghan people. Beauty developers became “quasi-feminists” by way of linking Afghan women’s acceptance and desire for corporeal modernity with their liberation.

The script for the Beauty Academy of Kabul documentary directly associated the burqa with the Taliban regime; this provided the necessary backdrop against which the tale of corporeal liberation could be written. Importantly, it also served to obscure the role the U.S.s played in creating the conditions that led to the rise of the Taliban. Afghan women’s bodies acted as a physical and social metaphor for deliverance by way of their manufactured transformation into a modern, Western, and hegemonic example of the global feminine subject. This modern feminine body must be presented publicly and meet (or strive for) narrowly defined ideals of beauty, largely associated with lighter skin color and Anglo-Saxon facial features combined with a thin, tall, and young-looking body. The prescribed and (pre)scripted liberation associated with corporeal modernity as discussed in this article places the “First World” white female as the “gentle savior” of her Third World “sister,” which Orientalizes Afghan woman’s suffering under the burqa as imposed by the Taliban.
This article sheds light on the interconnected web of politically and socially produced expectations placed on the modern feminine body, which acts as a representative space to monitor levels of acceptance to or rejection of Western modernity.


This article presents an overview of the author’s thinking/writing about Afghan women over the preceding 10 years. She traces the political economy of consecutive conflicts as it impacts the lives of Afghan women, using a feminist reading of women’s place in the discursive underpinnings of the various stages of the conflicts to raise questions about spaces of agency. Instead of focusing on the few Afghan organizations that have received recognition from the Western media or the international donor community, the voices incorporated into this article are of poor Afghan refugee women who were devastated by successive periods of conflict/war.

Afghan women have been the symbolic target of competing discourses and political strategies. The aerial bombardment in October 2001 that initiated the U.S.-led intervention in Afghanistan used the rhetoric of women’s emancipation as a major reason for the attack without pursuing real liberation. After the U.S.-led military intervention of 2001, and immediately after the Taliban were expelled, (e.g 2002/03) unfounded claims vis-a-vis women's betterment espoused by Karzi had not been realized. Afghan women, a clear majority of the Afghan population, were not at the centre of the government's concerns or those of the international community. Two major trends emerged from observing the Karzai interim administration: a visible change in rhetoric compared to the Taliban, and little change in women’s everyday lives, especially in rural contexts. Afghan women continued to face discrimination and violence, while their basic rights, such as the right to (physical) security and the right to livelihood, were almost as fragile as they had been under the Taliban. Furthermore, political representation of women was also problematic.

Engaging with these problematic areas, this article claims that conventional politics, informed by statist and masculinist ideologies and practices, are incapable of ensuring Afghan women’s emancipation. Specifically, the author makes three points. The first point is that the violence and bombing in Afghanistan cannot be justified in the name of the so-called liberation of Afghan women. This rationale for violence is highly reminiscent of colonial discourses on women. The second point is that the liberation of Afghan women cannot be considered to be about the removal of the Taliban. Rather, it should be understood in the larger context of international, statist, and masculinist politics, as Afghan women did not make substantive gains from the violence that was perpetrated and justified in their name. For her third point, the author raises the question: can violence be a recommended instrument for ensuring women’s rights? The article finds that, while there were symbolic gains for some women after the U.S.-led intervention, the actual impact of policy pronouncements did not extend beyond a few urban centers. Women’s lives in rural Afghanistan continued to be insecure, especially because the government had formed partnerships with many of the same forces that had historically impinged upon, and were currently restricting, women’s mobility, schooling, and employment.

For such women, for whom the events of the conflict led to either the death of innocent loved ones or the deprivation of some semblance of security, there was no respite from the oppressiveness of poverty or the despair of profound loss, helplessness, and depression. Bombing and mechanized violence may have helped the perpetrators target a faceless enemy, but they were incapable of delivering liberation. Looking at the conditions for Afghan women in terms of dichotomous constructions of liberators or oppressors will fail to properly address the issues
because, in the context of Afghanistan, there are commonalities and continuities that are obliterated from such dualistic analyses. Critical reflection that facilitates relevant intervention demands the rejection of binary categories so that social complexities can be analyzed.


This article situates the politics of gender in Afghanistan within the nexus of global and local influences that shaped the policy agenda of post-Taliban reconstruction. Three sets of factors that defined the parameters of efforts at securing gender justice are analyzed: a troubled history of state-society relations; the profound social transformations brought about by years of prolonged conflict; and the process of institution-building under way since the Bonn Agreement in 2001. This evolving institutional framework opens up a new field of contestation between the agenda of international donor agencies, an aid-dependent government, and diverse political factions, some with conservative Islamist platforms.

Because attempts at modernization, including reforms affecting the status of women, always emanated from an urban-based state elite trying to consolidate its control over a fractious periphery, repeated failures must be placed in the context of state-society relations in Afghanistan. Women’s rights in Afghanistan are caught up in the turbulent history of these relations. The history of women’s rights in Afghanistan has often been likened to a tug-of-war between centralizing state elites and a rural and tribal periphery intent on safeguarding its autonomy.

The author points out that attempting to understand gender relations from state policies and legal frameworks remains a limited exercise. The central apparatus of government has a restricted reach and the vast majority of women have little contact with state, markets, and civil society organizations. Women’s life options are primarily conditioned by the fortunes of the communities and households in which their livelihoods and day-to-day lives are embedded. It is, therefore, to these contexts that one must turn for a more realistic appraisal of the opportunities and constraints women face.

The dislocations caused by decades of civil war and drought have been the focus of studies of the political economy of conflict and livelihoods in Afghanistan. However, the effects of war and displacement on age and gender hierarchies in households and communities have yet to receive the attention they deserve. There is ample evidence, however, that lack of security and the criminalized networks associated with narcotics production and trade have had a profound effect on social relations. The implications of these transformations had not been fully absorbed into analyses of gender relations. At the grassroots level, the dynamics of gendered disadvantage, the erosion of local livelihoods, the criminalization of the economy, and insecurity at the hands of armed groups combined seamlessly to produce extreme forms of female vulnerability. Prospects for gender justice were conditioned by the multiple transitions Afghanistan faced in the process of reconstruction: a security transition (from war to peace), a political transition (to the formation of a legitimate and effective state), and a socio-economic transition (from a “conflict economy” to sustainable economic growth).

At the same time, the legal rights of women continued to be an area of great uncertainty. Women’s community participation and leadership roles frequently escaped detection in Afghanistan since they did not take place in the public arenas commonly associated with modern civil society. The politics of alliances and reputation play a central role in tribal and village societies, and women participated in decision-making through important roles in matchmaking, gift exchange, and
participation in life cycle rituals. Advancing age, religious learning, and membership in powerful lineages could confer considerable authority on women. Women were, however, excluded from customary bodies of local governance, dispute settlement, and arbitration. The significant discrepancies observed between women’s formal and substantive rights signal that there were deep-rooted obstacles to women’s civic and political participation.


In this article the author interprets and interrelates the various symbolic elements of gender ideology for a northern Afghanistan group. Using comparative materials from south-central Asia societies, the analysis shows that a crucial component of gender ideology includes the idea that a person uses reason and moral character to contain desire, and that the struggle against desire and self-indulgence is conducted in everyday life under constant evaluation by the self and others.

A variety of sources, including Islamic texts used in local mosque schools, interview statements, descriptions of incidents, informant narratives, and secondary sources on neighboring societies, are juxtaposed in the analysis. Data for the interpretation developed in this article were collected from male and female informants during 1976–1977 in Kunduz, a provincial capital in northern Afghanistan. Field research focused on a neighborhood (mahalla) dominated by an immigrant community who had come into the area from Soviet Uzbekistan during the 1920s and 1930s. These immigrants are known as *muhajirin*, a term sometimes translated as “refugees.” The *muhajirin* were a traditional, urban, merchant-class ethnic group. As a minority group, they lacked access to government positions and elite status.

To understand the Islamic theory of the nature of humanity, gender, and society with which the *muhajirin* are familiar, three terms must be defined and interrelated: *fitna* (chaos, disorder), *nafs* (desire), and *'aql* (reason). In the indigenous ideology, the interactive relationship of men and women could be summarized as one of four possibilities: incest [tabooed], marriage, veiling, and adultery. Throughout northern Afghanistan, individuals, families, and entire ethnic groups were evaluated according to vices and virtues derived from this conceptual framework. These concepts applied to both men and women, who, as individuals are supposed to struggle to control nafs.

Men frequently used an illustrative categorical symbol for the “bad woman.” They spoke of a female creature called an *almasti*, which apparently is a negative symbol for women who are beyond the control of men. The *almasti* emerges as a witchlike figure linked to concepts of pollution from menstrual blood, sexuality, and power. The *almasti* and, by derivation, women, are associated with *fitna*, or social disorder.

The author highlights how even this relatively clear, dual-stranded ideology becomes more obscure when ordinary conversations and ideas which emerge in ordinary life are examined. The article shows that the gender of the speaker and the context of discourse are key elements in understanding how individuals adjust the Islamic normative framework to comment about gender, moral character, and behavior. Thus, at the micro level, gender considerations relate to issues of ethnicity and prestige relationships, family life, and even supernatural creatures that become metaphors for improper behavior.

2.2. Development, empowerment, equality

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There is a significant and growing number of scholarly feminist critiques of and debates over the U.S.-led international coalition’s gendered approach to “saving” Afghanistan from the Taliban. Geopolitical framings of Afghan women as the subject of gender-focused development and modernization efforts have been regularly presented without a clear or consistent understanding of the contextual aspects of gender relations. Crucially, the corporeal has represented, and continues to represent, a key site onto which and through which conceptualizations of modernity and tradition are enacted in contemporary Afghanistan. This article seeks to add to the body of feminist critiques by discussing these geopolitical encounters at the scale of bodily interactions in international spaces of aid/development and private sector work in Afghanistan.

The analysis is theoretically situated within critical feminist geographies and includes empirical data collected on three separate site visits to Kabul (summer 2006, winter 2007, and summer 2008). The author conducted surveys, interviews, and focus groups, and carried out observations of international workers in the humanitarian aid and development sectors and private contractor, logistics, and security sectors (of the 150 international workers observed, 55% were female). Participants were asked a variety of questions related to their work and personal life in Afghanistan. Questions included identifying recreation activities and types of relationships with international workers and Afghans. The author also conducted surveys and interviews with 30 Afghan men and 25 women living in Kabul city with the help of local research assistants, and participant observation with Afghan families.

In the context of Afghanistan, performances associated with wearing tight-fitting or skin-revealing clothing, the use of alcohol, homosexuality, sex outside of marriage, and multiple sex partners (and in some cases the use of brothels) were generally associated (among internationals) as modern counters to the “restrictive” corporeal measures within Afghan traditions and social/cultural norms. Conversely, many of these behaviors were identified as possible because they were occurring in a space of chaos and disorder, which international research participants identified as “freedom from” the order of modern societies. International workers engaging in questionable, illegal, or “unacceptable” behaviors linked these behaviors to their time in Afghanistan and the lack of “modern order” in conflict zones. The author argues that international worker experiences of these corporeal and behavioral “freedoms” are both gendered and conditionally reinforced through their international status, mobility, and privileged displacement.

Interestingly, in all these examples, women’s bodies continually signified a key site of contestation, politically laden with signifiers for orchestrating and manipulating identity politics. The diverse experiences of aid/development in this study situate the corporeal as a space from which to represent, refashion, or resist gendered expectations of the body in public space.


Countries seeking power in Afghanistan have championed the cause of freeing women from tribal customary norms. The stated intention may have been to improve the lives of Afghan women, but many authors contend that this was only a pretext and that the real intentions were to undermine the control of Afghan men, who are the sole decision-makers in the family and in political life, and to shake the stability of their communities. Since 2001, when NATO forces ousted the Taliban government, a great deal of research on gender issues and the status of women has been done in
Afghanistan. There is, however, a lack of research on how Afghan men themselves view these efforts to promote gender equality and women’s rights. An Afghan man researching the ideas of Afghan men is still a relatively rare phenomenon. This article makes two arguments: first, gender norms have long been imported into Afghanistan by imperial others, creating particular geopolitics of gender; and second, changes to the Afghan Constitution to promote gender equality, and programs by international organizations in the contemporary context have largely failed because they have not engaged Afghan men in the process.

The study that provides the research basis for this article was conducted in Kabul city and the Paghman district, the latter a rural area in the western part of Kabul province, from May to September 2012. Semi-structured individual interviews and group interviews were used to examine whether the policies and practices of gender equality initiatives had had an effect on the Afghan men of, arguably, the most progressive city in the country. The research of 48 informants was limited to a target population of Afghan men of a certain level of education and experience. Even religious men, interviewed in a rural setting, had a high degree of education, albeit as religious/Islamic scholars. There is a large group of uneducated and functionally illiterate Afghans who are not represented in the study. In addition, most of the respondents were young men between the ages of 20 and 40, who might have been expected to have more liberal views on the issue of gender.

Some of the interviewees maintained that the concept of gender has alienated Afghan men to the extent that gender equality initiatives, such as skills training, affirmative hiring, and advancement, provoke men. Gender is conflated with “women” in Afghanistan and does not, in the public estimation, include men. The general dissatisfaction with mainstream gender programs was not merely due to the lopsided focus of these programs on women and women’s issues, but also stemmed from the near absence of men in such projects. The respondents also considered the affirmative hiring of women by the aid and development community to be unfair, particularly in light of widespread and significant unemployment in the country.

This research shows that Afghan men, regardless of the their level of education and whether they resided in Kabul city or the rural province, do not consider women as equal to men. This is despite the changes to the constitution and the efforts of the mainstream development community to promote gender equality. Furthermore, the men saw gender equality as a license for women to discount the opinions of men. Customs and religious values seem to prevail over the modern discourse of rights and equality in Kabul. The Western understanding of rights is seen to be at odds with Islamic codes of conduct for women and men; accordingly, the human rights agencies operating in Afghanistan are viewed as antagonists who will spread feminist “propaganda” about what they understand to be an abuse of women’s rights. In general, Afghan men see the acceptance of gender equality and the implementation of legislated women’s rights as being detrimental to their interests. Approval of freedom for women is equivalent to accepting a diminished role for men, one where they are no longer in control. Gains for women mean losses for men.

In Afghanistan, where men wield power in all spheres, private and public, and greatly resent the cultural invasion of foreigners and the Western idea of liberal democracy, there remain many barriers to the achievement of gender equality goals. The author finds that the efforts of the international community to promote gender equality and improve the conditions of women in Afghanistan have not worked as expected. On the contrary, they have provoked even educated Afghan men into taking up more defensive and conservative positions, instead of convincing them that women deserve equal rights. Their masculinity becomes a response to the imported gender norms that have been part of the U.S.-led war on terror. The article therefore suggests that efforts to promote positive changes in the condition of women in Afghanistan must respond to men’s
understanding of masculinity and arguments against gender equality. Moreover, if the policymakers are to obtain the support of men for gender equality, a more inclusive definition of gender should be adopted in terms generally understood by Afghan men.


Despite the findings that increased female participation results in positive economic and societal outcomes, the question of which policy actions can promote female empowerment remains a contentious. This is even more the case in countries such as Afghanistan that are highly traditional and religiously conservative. Afghanistan scores very low on the Human Development Index, especially for social indicators pertaining to women. Specifically, women face particularly extreme constraints on economic, social, and political activity, owing to three decades of civil conflict, as well as to strict tribal codes and cultural mores that curtail interactions between unmarried men and women. In rural Afghanistan, women are generally barred from activities outside the household so as to preserve their honor (*gheirat*), while the principle of *purdah* dictates that women should be generally hidden from public view. These norms render local governance a strictly male-dominated activity.

In this study, the authors examined whether development programs that mandated women’s community participation improved women’s status in societies characterized by female repression. Specifically, the authors exploited a randomized field experiment conducted during August and September 2007 in 500 villages (spanning ten rural districts) in Afghanistan to measure the effect of a development program that had special provisions aimed at promoting gender equality. These provisions included the establishment of a gender-balanced village development council, equal participation of men and women in the elections for the council and in the selection of development projects, and a requirement that at least one project is prioritized by women. The article explores how this development program affected attitudes and outcomes pertaining to women’s role in family life, the village community, and society more broadly.

The survey consisted of four different instruments: (a) a male household questionnaire administered to ten randomly selected male heads of household in each village; (b) a male focus group questionnaire administered to a group of village leaders in each village; (c) a female focus group questionnaire administered to a group of important women who tended to overwhelmingly be wives or other relatives of the village leaders; and (d) a female individual questionnaire. In total, the survey covered 13,899 male and female villagers as well as village leaders.

The article found that, even in a highly conservative context like Afghanistan, the inclusion of provisions aimed at promoting gender equality (e.g. increasing female participation in some economic, social, and political activities, including increased mobility and income generation) created positive outcomes for women. These positive effects, however, did not appear to carry over to other areas that were not directly linked to the program’s prescribed interventions. Even though women were arguably gaining legitimacy in the community sphere, their role in the family appeared to remain largely unchanged.

Overall, the results indicate that this community-driven development intervention increased women’s involvement in community life as reflected both in women’s increased activity outside the household and in making men and women more accepting of female participation in local governance and other aspects of community life. Specifically, men became more open to the idea
of women being involved in the work of a village council and in participating in the selection of the village head. The intervention also had a positive effect on the socialization of women and their involvement in income-generating activities. However, the program did not affect either the position of women within the family or the attitudes toward women’s role in society more broadly.


This article explores contextual factors related to women’s food security and agricultural opportunities, describes key project activities and approaches, and discusses project successes and challenges, sustainability, and implications for future programs. It found that “kitchen gardens have the potential to sustainably improve nutrition, food security, and women’s economic power, particularly when coupled with education and training in horticulture, food processing, and nutrition.” In Afghanistan, kitchen gardening and livestock production are culturally appropriate activities for women and can generate more income than most activities in which women are currently involved.

Yet Afghan women face unique challenges accessing training and resources to maximize small-scale agricultural output. In addition, women do not participate in the market and are less likely to control income and spending than are Afghan men or women in other countries. The lack of training of women has adverse implications for agricultural development, productivity, and quality as well as for nutrition, food security, and health. Farmer field schools (FFS) provide an alternative to the conventional top-down extension approach used widely in Afghanistan by emphasizing participatory methods, experimentation, and fluid problem solving. The informal, hands-on, and interactive style of training works well for women with limited literacy and classroom experience.


This case study, on the making of policy in agriculture and rural development, aims to contribute to an understanding of how aid does or does not contribute to building an effective Afghan state. Given the contextual factors—a country almost entirely dependent on external aid, a government struggling to establish itself with restricted control of the overall development expenditure, and where the broader modalities and priorities of state building and reconstruction remain contested—the question “Who makes policy and how?” is deeply relevant. There is much about policy that is deeply managerial and technical, particularly so in Afghanistan, where the reconstruction effort sought to build a state, to establish good governance, and to reduce poverty. This mainstream or linear model of policymaking not only has a tendency to separate out the policy design from the policy implementation, but it has a tendency to ignore the politics around the making of policy choices, the allocation of resources, and implementation processes. It ignores the widespread evidence that politics is fundamental to both policy choice and implementation practice.

The authors argue, based on the evidence, that three broad narratives drove policymaking in agriculture and rural development. Underpinning each of these narratives are different perspectives on both the challenges and how they are to be faced. The first, characterized as the “productionist”
viewpoint, was largely found within the Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL). It emphasized the need to increase production and drew its understanding of what needed to be done from a narrative based on Afghanistan’s past as a self-sufficient country with the rural population engaged in agriculture. It also sought to recreate the role that MAIL was perceived to have played in the past. The second narrative was essentially “developmentalist” and subscribed, to varying degrees, to the donor consensus on the need for good governance and private sector-led development, growth, and poverty reduction. It emphasized the need to create an enabling environment through good governance. It focused largely on creating the chances for the poor to act as agents of their own destiny. This view was subscribed to by all but one of the donors working with MAIL and the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD). The one donor that did not subscribe to this second narrative was the United States Agency for International Development (USAID): its position was characterized more as “market-driven,” with almost exclusive support of the private sector to drive development. Over time, the USAID appeared to shift its position from strong advocacy of the free market to more focused support for international agribusiness and commercialization.

The evidence showed that the attempt to merge these divergent narratives into a coherent agriculture and rural development sector strategy had largely failed. The development of an agriculture and rural development strategy had emphasized the competition between these positions rather than an exploration of potential complementarities.

This study reveals the basic incompatibility of effective government leadership with a high dependence on international aid. Across all programs, donor behavior, such as funding off-budget or selectively funding individual provinces, had not even reached the first stage of harmonization as envisaged in the Paris Declaration. While there were partial steps toward alignment, supporting some of the government’s agenda, and working through government systems, the lack of alignment was more striking than the degree to which it had been achieved. Under such conditions, it was apparent that ownership of the policy agenda does not rest with national ministries.


This working paper is based on two months of fieldwork conducted in Kabul in 2010, during which time 40 participants were interviewed using qualitative research methodologies of individual interviews and focus group sessions. The participants ranged from local and international NGOs, staff from Afghan ministries, local activists, international consultants, and bilateral and multilateral agencies, with the key source of information coming from local and international NGOs.

The article is a feminist reflection on the politics of aid, gender, and religion within the context of civil society organizations’ efforts to address violence against women in Afghanistan. Despite the international media coverage of gender-based violence in Afghanistan, at the daily level both local and international civil society organizations found it difficult to talk about the issue due to a number of factors. At the community level, one of the key challenges for civil society organizations was the denial from the community that sexual and gender-based violence existed and/or that it was a Western agenda. As gender and ending violence against women were “sensitive” topics in the country, donors increasingly adopted an Islamic framework when engaging with men and local communities. The preference was to reform male identities and practices through the authority of the Quran. While support of the religious sector in a country with a 99% Muslim majority may be seen as strategic and practical, the author argues that the arbitrary distinction between a secular
framework of gender and development (interpreted as atheist, Western, white feminist, and hostile to indigeneity) versus a religious one (perceived as culturally sensitive and universally endorsed) was not only false, but also promoted the notion that choices have to be religiously recommended and sanctioned.

Furthermore, the “instrumentalization of Islam” as a quick-fix solution to reduce gender discrimination and violence not only weakened the legitimacy of activists who sought a pluralistic space, but it also assumed Islam to be a homogenous religion with no tensions between the different schools and branches. The dialogue between conservative and progressive religious quarters in Afghanistan is highly relevant, and the need to engage with religious leaders and scholars for their expertise and support is indisputable. However, though possessing religious authority, mullahs are also under pressure from their constituents, especially those with economic and political influence. Therefore, when involving the religious sector in anti-violence against women initiatives, their limitations, as well as competing local interests, should be taken into consideration. From a feminist perspective, focusing purely on an Islamic framework also detracts from institutional problems and state-perpetrated discrimination against women.

In conclusion, the author proposes that whilst a religious framework is important in opening dialogue and acceptance about gender equality in Afghan communities, donor civil society organizations should also build the capacity of their staff and project implementing partners, coordinate better among implementing partners on existing projects, and focus on male behavioral change through a better understanding of masculinities and gender relations in local contexts. The author argues that it is crucial for aid agencies not to fall into the trap of “benevolent patriarchy,” that is, encouraging men to be nicer, rather than considering how gendered privileges and roles have impacted the lives of women.


This article is centered a general theory of gender stratification and theory of gender and development. Both gender theories focus on the importance of economic empowerment, or economic disempowerment, for women’s equality and well-being, and the ripple effects it has on women’s families, communities and nations, as well as for development. In Afghanistan, the author conducted final evaluations of two major United Nations Development Programme projects. The projects did not include provisions for gender, although the government’s participatory process to formulate the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) consulted 34 provinces on their country’s development and future: urban and rural, well-off and poor, males and for the first time, females.

The author argues that where women had economic power, it is posited that it tended to soften hostile, negative uses of other forms of power against them. Women with well-established economic power were less likely to be beaten, negative political and legal restrictions were less likely, the ideology was less male supremacist, and a large gender gap in education was unlikely. Increased economic power was causally linked to increased self-confidence, as well as increased say in household decision-making. This included decisions about domestic well-being (e.g., which children were to be taken to the doctor when sick and how that differs for boys and girls; economic issues (e.g., acquisition, allocation, and sale of assets); and fertility. Women’s economic empowerment was also linked to other positive development outcomes, including increased
environmental conservation, hence more sustainable development; less corruption, hence stronger economic growth; and lower HIV/AIDS prevalence.

In Afghanistan, men hold almost all of the economic power. Conversely, women have almost zero economic power and their overall position is arguably one of the most unequal on Earth. The fact that the overwhelming majority of women were almost wholly without economic power—neither earning income nor owning/controlling land or other assets—had strong repercussions. The author characterizes women’s economic empowerment as a “magic potion for development” and women’s economic disempowerment as a “poison potion for development.” Afghanistan embodies what happens where economically powerless women, a long history of war (the most recent series of wars beginning in 1978), and distorted development come together.


Based on case studies from northeastern Afghanistan, this working paper argues that the Western concept of village cannot be automatically applied to local contexts. This is not a mere truism, as evidenced by the apparent difficulties faced by organizations, government agencies, and national elites, all of whom are used to thinking in idealized Western-biased administrative terms, when they are planning to implement local-level projects in Afghanistan.

Among other local governance related research, the author carried out three months of intensive field studies in three target irrigation systems in Kunduz province between March and November 2006.

The empirical evidence suggests that a high fluidity and pluralistic nature of the notion of “village” existed at the local level. The concept of village in Kunduz province was particularly contested due to the settlement history and natural-geographical conditions of the area. On the one hand, rural residents did not think and act in terms of clearly (territorially) delimited spaces in their everyday interactions. Rather, the residents’ frame of reference seemed to be a socio-economic space in which they were active for their daily routines and that was structured by face-to-face social network relationships. On the other hand, a clear tendency of the existing government-initiatives was to penetrate rural spaces and define them administratively by assigning proper names to some settlements and registering these in official records.

Two opposing views therefore emerged, the territorial view from the government side (“from above”) and the social network perspective of rural residents (“from below”). Most likely these distinct meanings did not even touch upon each other because the state had not thus far ever managed to administer the rural areas completely.

Afghanistan is a highly centralized state where all budgetary and staffing decisions are exclusively made in Kabul. Neither provincial nor district administrations are allowed a minimum level of autonomy in taking policy decisions. Whereas donor-driven projects are guided by international decentralization, empowerment, and participatory ideas, the high level of centralization of the government system does not allow the diversion of financial resources and legal rights to subnational levels. In short, villages are not legally recognized units of subnational administration. This is an important fact that hardly any actor intervening in local settings has been taking into account.
When searching for an intervention unit for any kind of development project work or a unit of analysis for local governance research, questions arise regarding what comprises a village, for example, whether it has borders, where these borders are and how they are determined, and what the growth dynamics are (such as population, migration, mosques, etc.). Often, these are not fixed and remain largely unknown. The multiple names attached to settlements and the use of seemingly arbitrary micro, meso, and macro designations makes it difficult for outside organizations and researchers because they are very much used to thinking along “village” lines. As a result, the rural areas are being approached with outdated village lists from the 1960s and 1970s because they are the only official documents available regarding local communities.

### 2.3. Suffering, resilience, coping strategies


A critical health-related issue in war-affected areas is how people make sense of adversity and why they show resilience in a high-risk environment. In Afghanistan, political and military conflicts have led to a massive disruption of livelihoods, education, and social support networks. Afghan families have endured pervasive poverty, economic instability, and persistent violence. Recent research, integrating perspectives from psychiatry and anthropology, has shown that adult and child mental health correlates not just with past experiences of conflict, but with present-day stressors such as ongoing domestic violence and inequalities in access to basic services. Since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001, and in the context of an ongoing war, large-scale reconstruction programs have raised expectations for socio-economic advancement, accentuated inequalities, and led to widespread frustrations with persistent social injustice. How do Afghans experience such adversity, construct hopes for the future, and make sense of everyday suffering? This article critically examines why and how culture matters in shaping experiences of distress and resilience, in generating both a sense of coherence and a sense of entrapment.

This article examines how sources of distress and resilience are articulated in Afghan families, in light of a theoretical understanding of suffering and hope derived from the social sciences. In 2006, the authors conducted face-to-face interviews with 1,011 children (aged 11–16) and 1,011 adult caregivers, randomly selected in a school-based survey in three northern and central areas (Kabul, Bamyan, and Mazar-e-Sharif). Participants narrated their experiences as part of a systematic health survey, including an open-ended questionnaire on major life stressors and solutions used to mitigate them. Two original aspects of this work were to draw a systematic random sample of participants for in-depth interviews, thus transcending many limitations of purely qualitative work, and to provide a cross-generational perspective through statements from both children and adults.

For adults, most problems were explained by the Dari expression *iqtisad kharab* (broken economy) and other catchphrases that underlined the importance of money. Men and women worried about financing a family, the lack of work, unstable markets, rising rents, large debts, and a frustrating inability to get beyond a state of simply “living from one day to the next.” A key sign of the “broken economy” was not owning a home, which was equated with a loss of social position and feelings of insecurity. Poverty and living in overcrowded housing led to a deterioration of social relationships. Economically frustrated husbands were described by their wives and children as being “ill-natured” (a socially neutral phrase indicating difficult or abusive domestic relations). Men’s outbursts of anger were put down to an inability to secure work and fulfil their
responsibilities as household head. Violent behavior at home was also labeled a “mental problem.” Women also reported being violent due to frustration with their circumstances. Poverty and its social ramifications placed a significant burden on the physical and emotional well-being of children and adults. Adult men were more likely than women to raise governance and educational issues, while adult women were more likely than men to cite housing, relationships, and health. Issues of governance and social justice permeated the day-to-day lives of respondents. Political instability and corruption were linked to the inadequate provision of electricity, water, clinics, roads, and schools. For students, frustrations focused on the lack of learning environments as well as poverty, as education is perceived as the gateway to upward social and economic mobility.

Hope arises from a sense of moral and social order embodied in the expression of key cultural values: faith (iman), family unity (wahdat) and harmony (ittifaq), service (khidmat), perseverance and effort (koshesh), morals (akhlaq), and social prominence, respectability, and honor (‘izzat). These values form the bedrock of resilience, drive social aspirations, and underpin self-respect and dignity. However, economic impediments, social expectations, and cultural dictates also combine to create entrapment, as the ability to realize personal and social aspirations is frustrated by structural inequalities injurious to health and well-being. For example, adults often expressed their material poverty in terms of being unable to fulfil social obligations, with consequent loss of honor. The inability to own a home, provide a stable income for the household, and arrange preferred marriages for children, were common sources of distress, shame, and depression. In a culture that places a premium on large, extended families, interlinked by marriage and the exchange of wealth, the “broken economy” was clearly debilitating for both social functioning and psychological well-being. For students, there was worry over the curtailment of their education due to poverty or cultural directives.

In this study, Afghans articulated a forceful, policy-relevant message: there is no health without mental health, no mental health without family unity, no family unity without work, dignity, and a functioning economy, and no functioning economy without good governance.

This article contributes to a small but growing body of work on resilience in public health and conflict settings. It highlights the relevance of ethnographic work in identifying what matters most in formulating social and public health policies to promote a hopeful future. It also demonstrates that culture functions both as an anchor for resilience and an anvil of pain. The inability to fulfill one’s social obligations and to realize personal aspirations are twin facets of entrapment. Paradoxically, the ability to demonstrate adherence to cultural values may reproduce inherent social injustices; for women these are perpetuated by the dominance of men in politics, economics, and social relations, and for youth by the power of elders in decision-making.


Climate change is taking its toll on Afghanistan. The bulk of agricultural activities have depended on seasonal precipitation as well as on snowmelt at higher elevations during the warmer summer months. Warming temperatures and decreasing precipitation levels over the last fifty years have led to innumerable weather anomalies causing droughts, floods, unseasonal precipitation, falling ground water tables, desertification, and loss of biodiversity. While it is projected that further change in climatic conditions will take place over the coming decades, the impacts of these environmental stresses on the living conditions and livelihoods of Afghans have already been
significant and adverse. Among all population groups, rural communities in Afghanistan are particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change due to their strong dependence on agriculture for living.

The exploratory research in this thesis used a qualitative methodology to investigate and document firsthand the vulnerability of rural communities to climate change impacts in the context of food security in Afghanistan. To this end, three villages in Balkh, Herat, and Nangarhar provinces were studied for their exposure to climate change and the communities’ adaptive capacity to cope with and avert climate-related stresses. Additional key informant interviews were conducted to learn about similar issues in other rural regions of the country. The primary data was collected from December 2009 through January 2010.

Daily dietary components for a rural household consisted of mainly carbohydrates from rice, potatoes, pulses, and wheat, and vegetable or animal fat used with onions and garlic in meal preparation. When in season, this dietary base was supplemented with vegetables such as spinach, tomatoes, and eggplants. Families that raised chickens added eggs to their diet. Except for special occasions, very little meat was consumed due to scarcity and prohibitive cost. Poorer families often had bread and sweetened tea for most of their meals. Subsistence farming for these ingredients was dependent on rainfall or access to water. In years with inadequate access to water, ingredients needed to be purchased. However, without income from sources other than the meager agricultural produce in good years, the foodstuffs available on the market were unaffordable for the vast majority of poor rural households. Most interviewees agreed that agriculture alone was not a reliable option for supporting families given the existing climate conditions.

The study found that climate change had substantially contributed to increased food insecurity in rural communities throughout Afghanistan in the 1990s and 2000s. Rural households were facing real challenges in generating income from agricultural activities while also taking desperate measures to cope with and adapt to climatic conditions. The main coping and adaptive measures taken by the study households were outmigration to nearby cities and neighboring countries; digging deeper and bigger wells for irrigation; changing and supplementing occupation by joining the military—or, in some cases, joining the insurgency—or working as wageworkers or skilled workers; resorting to food aid; and switching to more high-value crops, such as poppy and saffron, that require less water. Among these, however, the most common practice reported by all focus group participants in all three study sites was outmigration. Evidence from the study sites suggests that even tightly knit families were disintegrating due to persistent changes in weather patterns, causing a breakdown of the link between livelihoods and agriculture.

Furthermore, most women in Afghanistan did not participate in paid economic activity. They were highly dependent on the men in their families for their livelihood expenses or on their own labor on their small plots for food. As such, women and children of poor families were among the most vulnerable to climate change-related outcomes that undermined living off the land. A number of the women interviewed at the study sites worried that food shortages driven by climate change would force many families into selling their young daughters into marriages so that the dowry could be used as a source of temporary financial relief.

Having considered the experience of the previous two decades, most key informants and focus group participants agreed that relying on food aid was not the way to go. Not only had it failed to effectively and efficiently address their medium-term (in some cases even short-term) needs, but it had also served as a discouraging factor with regard to developing sustainable local solutions.
Masculinity has always occupied a central position in Afghan culture and identity. Historically, this masculinity has expressed itself through the designation of female behavior as a standard by which to judge male honor and social status.

The decades-long experience of extreme violence, and civil and political unrest—where death has become very unpredictable and state-instituted violence seems arbitrary—led to a situation where masculinity has been continuously challenged and oppressed. Afghan communities are missing the traditional institutions, such as education, employment, and family relationships, by which masculinity is asserted in other societies. Using traditional theories of masculinity, this article argues that, because the traditional means by which masculinity is asserted in most societies have been rendered virtually devastated or severely restricted by the long episodes of conflict, men will attempt to reclaim their masculinity through the use of violence, particularly in the private sphere, where women will often become the most accessible targets.

Much prior research had focused on exploring transitional justice from feminist perspectives; many studies had concluded that theories and processes of transitional justice fail to address or take into account the role and experiences of women. However, there had been little research done on the remasculinization of men post-conflict. Examining the move away from emasculation to remasculinization, from the point where conflict is contained to the point where a nation begins the transition to democracy and the rule of law, is a particularly helpful addition to the body of literature that is already available on the dilemmas facing women during the transitional process. The methods by which men may attempt to reclaim their masculinity after a conflict may result in dire consequences for the continued respect for and protection of women’s rights within post-conflict Afghan communities in particular.

Although Afghanistan has historically gone through periods where the preservation of women’s rights were seen as important objectives of the state and respecting and revering women was historically considered an important aspect of Afghan culture, it can certainly be argued that the political circumstances of the two decades prior to 2008 redefined Afghan masculinity as one that inherently involved female-targeted violence. The hypermasculinity of the Taliban regime had reformulated the question of what it means to be a man in Afghanistan. In essence, “being a man” in the Afghan context almost always involved the threat and use of violence, with women being most often the primary targets. Under the Taliban, women were perceived as inferior and their status as rights-bearers was continuously challenged. The rights of women have been further imperiled by the crisis in male masculinity that resulted from protracted episodes of male-targeted violence.

Although more international media coverage and zeal has been devoted to the plight of Afghan women during the rule of the Taliban, it is important to note that Afghan men were also frequently made targets of Taliban-initiated violence. Threats of death became prevalent as men were often arrested arbitrarily, humiliated through public flogging and brutality, and sometimes executed for the most minute of infractions. The arbitrariness of death also threatened the role of men as protectors of their families, particularly protectors of the women in their lives. In a culture where men are constructed as being vital to the public sphere, and the capacity to govern is considered a measure of manhood, the extreme experiences of violence coupled with the near inability of the majority of Afghan men to be involved in the political process, resulted in eroding feelings of

masculinity among Afghan men. Following the ousting of the Taliban and subsequent period of reconstruction, it is important to consider how Afghan men have and will attempt to reassert their masculinity after a long period of extreme violence and oppression, and how such practices may impinge on the human rights of women within Afghanistan.


Armed conflict has dire effects on all citizens, but women face specific challenges. Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine in the context of the early 2000s all have weak state systems and armed opposition groups, as well as serious problems with human security, human rights, and women’s participation. In Afghanistan’s highly patriarchal society, women have long been subjected to violence by husbands and male kin. On top of that, wars, and especially occupation by foreign powers, have been accompanied by crises of masculinity that have led to restrictions on women’s mobility and increases in violence against women. In all three countries, women have been caught between weak states, occupying powers, armed opposition movements, and patriarchal gender arrangements. Moreover, politics has been masculine and male-dominated, with women largely excluded from political decision-making. In such a context, what are the prospects for women’s empowerment? How to reconstruct—or in the case of Afghanistan, construct—political and economic systems while also ensuring human security and human rights, especially for women? These are among the questions addressed in this article, which also examines the gender dynamics of peacebuilding and reconstruction more broadly.

Afghanistan’s new 2004 constitution mandated compulsory education up to grade nine, but over 60% of girls remained out of school in 2004. The Taliban may have gone, but Afghan girls and women still learned to read and write in secret classrooms; girls did so because of attacks on schools or because their fathers would not send them to a state school, and women because the government prohibited married women from attending school. In 2004, the literacy rate was 14% for women and 43% for men. Patriarchal practices, attitudes, and policies prevailed. Approximately 57% of girls were married before the age of 16 years. Health statistics remained dire for citizens as a whole, but women also suffered very high rates of maternal mortality. In a culture where a woman without a sarparast (male household head) is often shunned, widows faced many prejudices and few institutions or policies were in place to assist their integration and independence. Son preference was still strong, and mothers could be abused by husbands and in-laws for not producing sons. Girls and women in many parts of the country were prosecuted for zina crimes (defined as any act of illicit sexual intercourse between a man and a woman), such as adultery, running away from home, and premarital sex. Self-immolations appeared to be on the rise in the country and this increase was tied to forced marriage; the typical victim was 14 to 20-years-old and was trying to escape a marriage arranged by her father.

Under such conditions, it is not surprising that the vast majority of women continued to wear the all-encompassing burqa. Veiling was determined not only by custom and tradition, but also social pressure within the family and fear of harassment in the street. Patriarchy and violence were played out on women’s bodies in other ways too, especially in the provinces. There were reports of retaliatory rapes of Pashtun women in northern Afghanistan by non-Pashtun men. Events in Afghanistan under both the mujahedeen (1992–1996) and the Taliban (1996–2001) demonstrated that women could experience punitive action over appearance, dress, and access to public space. The country in 2004 remained in chaos, torn apart by warlords. Agriculture was largely geared toward poppy cultivation for opium exports, feeding addictions in neighboring Iran and Pakistan.
These and many other examples show that women’s human security and human rights, along with a reduction of inequalities generally, are rarely considered in so-called peace processes. Without idealizing women, the author plausibly postulates that an enhanced role for women in reconstruction could minimize corruption and cronyism, if only because women’s absence from economic and political domains of power has prevented their involvement in clientelism. In addition, such a role would likely increase attention and allocations toward social policies to alleviate poverty, provide welfare, and promote social development. And since women have a stake in a welfare state that is also women-friendly, they are likely to assist in the (re)construction of strong social institutions, such as social service organizations, health facilities, nurseries, schools, and universities and training institutes.


The effects of socio-ecological transformations, such as climate change, the collapse of the Soviet empire, and civil war, are examined for 14 villages in the valleys of the Pamir Mountains in the historical Badakhshan region, now divided between Afghanistan and Tajikistan.

Preliminary findings are from fieldwork carried out in 2006 and 2007; 14 villages were included in the exploratory research. Additional interviews in 2007 and 2008 validated findings from 2006 and provided more depth. All participants were actively engaged in agriculture, pastoral activities, or both. The approach to this study is anchored in action research methodology; the goal is for applied research to contribute to livelihood security. The relevance of indigenous knowledge to understanding change in the Pamir Mountains of Badakhshan is articulated as an emergent science responding to the practical needs of agricultural and pastoral communities. In the Pamirs, indigenous human ecological knowledge was found to vary according to context, gender, and ecological profession. Women had significant knowledge about certain plants and livestock compared to men, and the sedentary agro-pastoralists and the nomadic pastoralists possessed different knowledge about their habitat based on their ecological profession. Discussions with community members centered on the following issues: priorities and concerns, such as energy needs for fuel and lighting, and physical and social infrastructure in the form of roads and schools; seasonal activities; plants collected rather than grown (i.e., medicinal plants); and sacred sites. The semi-structured interviews tended to be based on the livelihood and food-security concerns of the participants.

Positive adaptations, such as growing wheat at higher elevations, as well as their actions to protect sacred spaces and eliminate opium addiction, testify to the resilience, agency and creativity of the people of the Pamirs. However, people of both agricultural and pastoral cultures complained equally that they could no longer predict the weather. The increasing anxiety levels resulting from dramatic environmental change will have psychological and other consequences that are unknown. Given that this region of the Pamir Mountains had faced long-term war and repeated prospects for famine, the potential for resilience and adaptation may be diminished.

In the complex setting of the Pamir Mountains, characterized by both cultural and ecological diversity and marked by artificial political boundaries, the creative and pragmatic interaction between indigenous and scientific knowledge sustains the best hope for survival. According to the author, applied research must combine communities of inquirers (research institutions) with communities of social practitioners (farmers, pastoralists, and civil society institutions) to facilitate indigenous participation in generating context-specific knowledge.
Scholarship on coupled socio-cultural and ecological systems suggests that biocultural diversity can support resilience. Resilience is observed where there is systemic stress. The collapse of the Soviet political and economic structure, a period of 30 years of civil war, and the strategic significance of Afghanistan in the global game of alliances combined to form the setting from which to ask: How can a dynamic concept of pluralism inform adaptation, survival, and resilience in the face of dramatic socio-cultural and environmental change?

In the context of increasing vulnerability among the peoples of the Pamir Mountains, there is also evidence of resilient communities building upon their pluralistic ethnic and religious heritage and diverse ecological niches. The goals of this article are to (a) explore the mechanisms by which pluralism facilitates mutual survival among diverse communities; (b) illustrate that pluralism has an ecological foundation; and (c) further understand the coupling of socio-cultural and ecological systems through the linkage of pluralism to resilience.

In 2006, the author interviewed small groups of people from three ethnic origins: Kyrgyz, Shugni, and Wakhi. Semi-structured group interviews based on action research methods allowed community participants to state their priorities, which guided the research process. These group interviews were followed by individual interviews. In all, 38 individuals, all male, were interviewed as part of this preliminary research. In the course of the interviews, it became clear that the survival of these people in the face of war and the uncertainties of socio-cultural and environmental change depended on mutual support between ethnic groups. In 2008, follow-up interviews were conducted to validate the information from 2006 and pursue the linkage between pluralism, resilience, and adaptation to change. This time, 61 individuals were interviewed, consisting of 45 men and 16 women. In 2009, additional interviews were conducted with Arab Pashtu (13 women and 7 men), as well as more follow-up interviews with the Shugni (9 women and 3 men), a total of 32 individuals.

The research contradicted the prevailing narrative of central Asia as a region characterized by a clash of civilizations between the democratic West and a fossilizing and fanatical interpretation of Islam. The article demonstrates how the dichotomy between nature and culture was not relevant to the context of the diverse peoples of the Pamirs. Socio-cultural and ecological systems were linked through relationships between people and their environment, which included both relations between humans and relations between humans and other animals, plants, and their habitats. Each of the communities occupied a distinct ecological niche, but the niches overlapped seasonally. This required an understanding between the communities for sharing common resources. Given the context of long-term warfare, hegemony of a narrow interpretation of Sunni Islam under the Taliban, limited arable land in mountainous regions, and religious and ethnic differences, one might expect that this part of the Pamirs would have been ripe for conflict. However, it is precisely this diversity that enabled these communities to engage in close and symbiotic relations that ensured each other’s survival.

This article asserts that the multiplicity of ecological environments in the Pamir Mountains is advantageous for ecosystem services in general and food security in particular. At times of stress, these ecosystem edges provide indigenous communities with a means of enhancing resilience through flexibility and adaptive capacity. These ecological edges, along with their resources, facilitate trade and exchange between different cultural groups. Their contact is not just trade in...
widgets, but exchange of ideas and strategies that facilitate flexibility and resilience in the context of unanticipated change and significant socio-economic stress. Facilitative relations between the ethnically diverse Kyrgyz and Wakhi, as well as the Pashtu and Shugni, contribute to their mutual survival and food sovereignty. The common good is achieved by harnessing ethnic, religious, and ecological diversity.


Afghanistan is at best a fragile state and at worst a failed state. Nevertheless, public goods are provided routinely and effectively in villages throughout the country. Detailed qualitative studies of Afghanistan have shown that disputes are normally resolved at the local level. Moreover, water, land resources, and access to credit are generally maintained through community rules and norms. Public faith in “traditional” organizations stems from their ability to deliver public goods. The author of this paper argues that customary organizations are the primary source of order in Afghanistan not only because they can extract and redistribute resources from villagers, but because they are constrained in their ability to do so. Constraints such as the separation of village powers and local checks and balances facilitate local predictability despite national-level chaos. Indeed, emphasis on the customary organizations “traditional” features conceals their 'modern' capacities to govern. By analyzing the productive role of informal organizations in the provision of public goods, this research brings local politics into the study of state building in post-conflict or fragile environments.

To explore these questions in rural Afghanistan the study relies on both quantitative and qualitative evidence. The statistical analysis explores the effect of customary and non-customary organizations on three types of public goods: resolution of land disputes, general dispute resolution, and local safety and security. Three case studies are also presented to illustrate public goods provision based on a larger set of original semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions the author collected in 2007 during fieldwork in 32 villages across six provinces.

The author focuses on a constellation of three key customary organizations: shuras (village councils), maliks (village executives), and mullahs (village lawgivers). These organizations emerged before a central state consolidated, and their existence is thus exogenous to the state. They existed parallel to existing regimes and endured decades of war and chaos. At first glance these organizations may resemble feudal systems characterized by inequality in decision-making and exploitation of peasants by landlords. However, anthropologists, economists, and historians have noted that rural life in Afghanistan is historically more egalitarian than in other areas of south and central Asia.

Based on empirical evidence, the author highlights how the first step in the investigation of the potential for a bottom-up state-building strategy is determining what works locally. Difficulties arise when state-building efforts proceed as if these organizations are inherent enemies of modernization or do not exist at all. In fact, state builders have often treated these organizations as embodiments of a “conservative political culture” that disenfranchises women or exploits peasants. In most cases, state builders did not consider them at all, or they were just assumed to have been wiped out by decades of war.

Prior to 2004, twenty years of conflict and four years of drought stretched taut Afghan society. Breakdowns in support structures accelerated with each passing year, but the family continued to represent the one cohesive reality that enabled most individuals to cope with the tragedies they faced. The extended family thus functioned as the major economic, social, and political unit of society and guaranteed security, from birth to death, for each man and woman. It is the central focus where individuals found status, socialization, education, economic security, and protection. And, because the state service infrastructure was so inadequate or, for too many, totally non-existent, family networks replaced government as a support system in which the reciprocal family rights and obligations were clearly defined and readily acknowledged by all. This article examines family patterns and recounts the various events that impinged upon family life and analyzes some of the variables that will govern the rejuvenation of this badly tattered society.

The heady era of the 1970s was characterized by several periods of student demonstrations and a spate of labor strikes that kept the country in general unrest. Conflicts over societal values intensified. Technically, no legal political parties existed, but the heated confrontations soon split the antagonists into groups on the left and on the right, each with its own vision of preserving Afghanistan’s integrity. However, the protagonists of change were isolated from the bulk of the population living in the countryside. Here, while refugee populations initially strengthened family bonds, social dislocations became increasingly disruptive and family cohesiveness was progressively weakened.

In the context of this 2004 paper, Afghanistan swings uneasily from a tangled fragile thread. Rural populations look forward to resuming the fundamentals of family life. The social climate is stressed. Families that split to follow alternative ideological paths or were distanced from exile or resettlement. However, when they reunite, the reunions are often uneasy. How to act is no longer clear. They have lost the clear perception that came with traditional roles, while alternatives remain clouded. The article points out how Afghans need something solid on which to stand. As shaky as it is, in some instances, the family is the only stable institution available. It will be the traditional family support system that will provide the key to reconstruction and prosperity.


Among the Durrani Pashtuns, food, eating, and commensality are discussed in terms of four domains of discourse: the Quranic, the tribal, the humoral, and the magical. Each domain is related to a distinct section of the Afghan-Islamic great tradition. Each refers to a discrete social context in which Durrani evaluate and use food in quite different ways—the contexts, respectively, of formal religious belief and action, political and economic competition, personal health and nutrition, and coping with misfortunes caused by occult powers.

The data for this article are drawn mainly from one Durrani community, whose members operated a dual economy, based on sheep pastoralism and irrigated agriculture. The Durrani diet was simple: staple foods were bread made from wheat flour, and milk products, especially ghee and dried whey. Other milk products, vegetables, and fruits were highly seasonal; rice was something of a luxury, and fresh meat was eaten regularly only by the rich. Three “meals” were eaten each day: for most people the first two consisted of bread and tea and some milk product; in the evening people managed some sort of a cooked meal, a stew, soup, or perhaps a rice pudding, and the
indispensable bread. Nutritionally, the diet of ordinary people was probably barely adequate, while poorer Durrani often went hungry. While such a description of the Durrani diet presents a stark picture, it does not preclude the existence of complex ideas about food.

The ethnographic starting point for the authors’ analysis is the ubiquity and ambiguity—in Durrani culture generally (as in many others) but here specifically in relation to food—of moral and political evaluations in terms that translate easily into “goodness” and “power.” When Durrani describe food as “good” (sha), this may be an evaluation in any one (or more) of three distinct modes or systems of classification. They may elaborate by explaining the evaluation with another term that will identify the mode in which it was intended. Thus, they may say that the food is good because it is pak (clean, pure) and rawa or halal (permitted), indicating that it is approved, if not recommended, by the Quran or by the Prophet Muhammad. Or they may say the food is good because it has good khwand (taste), referring to aesthetic perceptions that are also culturally linked with ideas of economic and political status. Or, third, they may declare the food good because it is munasib (suitable), that is, appropriate food for the health of a particular person in particular conditions. Implicitly or explicitly linked with “goodness” is the much more operational term zyr (power), which is also associated with the three distinct modes of classification. The nature of power and the effects it can bring may be specified again by way of elaboration or explanation: by the terms barakat or kheyr (religious power, grace, blessing), suwab (merit), khoshali or khwashi (pleasure, happiness, enjoyment), mor or sir (full, satisfied, prosperous), or mafad or fayda (physical or medical profit, benefit).

These three modes (i) clean/pure/permitted, (ii) good taste, and (iii) suitable of evaluating food belong to three complementary domains of discourse: the Quranic, the tribal, and the humoral. Each domain comprises a system of knowledge and meanings as well as an operational program for maximizing “goodness” and “power.” There is a fourth domain, of rather a different order from the others: the magical. In some ways the magical domain is residual, with a semantic structure and operational program largely derived from those of the other three domains. Its distinctiveness lies in the way it closes the entire system.

Though the domains are analytically distinct and contextually discrete, for Durrani actors they exist as alternative frames of reference between which they switch according to context. Shifts between domains are facilitated by the breadth and ambiguity of the values the authors translate as “goodness” and “power” and by the central role played in all domains by blood as a dominant symbol and by the rituals of communal sacrificial meals. Within each domain, the meanings of these values, symbols, and rituals can be seen as distinct and even inconsistent with their meaning in other domains, but their polysemy and ambiguity, revealed in different social contexts, give the system its practical coherence while allowing one domain, the Quranic, to appear to dominate the rest.


This thesis examines the transmission of food as heritage in the Afghan diaspora in London to understand how populations resulting from forced displacement reconcile the memory of home with their experiences in the host nation in forming their identity. Through the accounts of seventeen first- and second-generation Afghan women refugees, collected between late April and the end of June 2015, the study suggests that the changing culinary practices in the Afghan diaspora
are dependent on the group’s forced migration. The consolidation of an Afghan food identity is made more transparent because of the diaspora’s recency and its ongoing materialization.

Afghanistan’s cultural diversity is reflected in the diversity of its food. Afghan cuisine is mainly non-vegetarian and includes lamb, tomato paste, aromatic spices (such as turmeric, cinnamon, and cardamom), - and onions among its staple ingredients. Just as religion forged a concept of the nation, the urbanization of Kabul has created a more cohesive form of Afghan cuisine that overcomes regional differences. The origins of traditional dishes reflect the intersections between regionalism and transnational influences in Afghanistan. For example, the north of the country is heavily dependent on animal husbandry and rice cultivation. The region’s best-known dishes, such as Qabili palaw (the national rice dish) and the dumpling mantu, both feature meat as a main ingredient. On the other hand, geographical conditions in the east of the country have made it an agrarian region and its people therefore have a largely vegetarian diet. Regionally, specific dishes can now be found throughout Afghanistan but are still most prevalent in their regions of origin. All of Afghan cuisine culminates in the cosmopolitan capital and there is no definitive Kabuli cuisine. In addition, Afghanistan’s historical position along the ancient Silk Route brought imports, including Chinese tea and Indian spices, which have a lasting influence on Afghan cuisine today.

From the accounts presented in this thesis it seems that rice was the basis for a reimagined identity in the diaspora. Rice as a staple therefore served to overcome regional differences and Qabili palaw, by extension, was the quintessence of Afghan food identity both at home and in the diaspora. Specific ingredients that many claimed were unavailable included qurut, which is dry, concentrated yogurt, and sandanak, a wild-grown leek. In Afghanistan, food was bought from the market closer to the time it was needed, whereas in the UK the availability of fridges meant food was bought less frequently and stored for longer. When asked which cultural practices they had continued since leaving, all the women listed religion in addition to culinary practices.

The Afghan case shows how food as heritage can exemplify a diasporic memory that is resonant of “reflective nostalgia.” Moreover, they can attest to a group’s willingness to identify with their host nation without belittling their cultural identity.

2.4. Agriculture, gender roles, livelihoods


Using the sustainable livelihoods framework as a conceptual lens, this thesis explores the various ways in which rural Afghan women contribute to household livelihoods through agricultural activity in Charikar, Parwan Province. It examines the specific activities in which women participate in agriculture activities and investigates the way that this participation varies based on factors such as age, marital status, location, and household structure.

Charikar is known throughout the region as a place of comparative wealth and abundance due to its water supply and fertile valley. The most common crops in Charikar include wheat, maize, tomatoes, onions, eggplant, peppers, cucumbers, and squash. Fruit trees, such as mulberries, apples, and apricots, often border vegetable fields and family compounds, providing an important source of nutrition and income. Charikar is well-known throughout the country as an important
centre of agricultural activity and a significant source for the produce sold in Kabul and in northern Afghan cities.

During the summer of 2004 the author began working with Development Works Canada on a project that engaged Afghan women in the Charikar area to sun-dry tomatoes for export to Europe. This project required the author to spend days traveling to over thirty villages within a 25-kilometer radius to speak with farming women and men about their agricultural activities. She observed agricultural practices in the fields and in homes. When she spoke to the women, they diminished their roles as farmers, saying that their husbands did most of the work, but they would sometimes help, thus indicating that their activities were not independent but were subordinate and tied to the activities of the men, who were seen as the true farmers. Women did not perceive themselves as farmers but saw themselves as farmers’ wives or daughters. However, with further inquiry, the author found that the women were working many hours in the fields, participated in a wide variety of agricultural activities, and were solely responsible for several areas, such as livestock maintenance and vegetable drying and sorting. To date, the household division of labor and the role that women play in agricultural activity in Afghanistan is still not well understood.

The research found that women provided an important, and often underestimated, source of human capital for household livelihood strategies. The thesis examines the frequent dichotomy between Afghan culture’s ideal gender roles and the ways that women participate in household livelihoods in reality. Women living in rural areas generally had more freedom of movement than urban women because most villages were established in kin-related groupings. Livelihood roles in rural areas were more interconnected, with women playing an important part in the household economy, which afforded them significant status. Several women indicated that they tend to be wholly responsible for some aspects of cultivation, particularly weeding and collecting seeds for use in the next season.

There was universal agreement by the research participants that all agricultural activities that took place within the house or compound were the sole responsibility of women. This encompassed an extensive list, including: sorting the vegetables for home use from those to be sold in the market; cleaning, storing, and packaging all produce and seeds; sun-drying vegetables for home use, especially tomatoes, chilies, spinach, coriander, and onions; grinding herbs and vegetables into powder for cooking and sometimes for sale; in some cases, planting and maintaining small gardens within the compound; separating wheat and chaff, and in some cases grinding wheat for flour; tending livestock, which might include chickens, turkeys, donkeys, cows, goats, or sheep; assisting in the birth of animals and care of the young; milking animals; making dairy products including butter, cheese, yogurt, milk, and quru; and collecting and drying fruits grown within the compound. In contrast to their subordinate role in crop cultivation, women were assigned the prime responsibility for livestock management though they were generally supported by their male relatives. In some cases, children would take animals outside to graze during the day or would bring grass or hay for the livestock into the compound.

In spite of this level of participation, the research illustrates the limited control and decision-making power that women have in agricultural pursuits. Young women indicated having the least amount of power, older women had more, while widows often acted as the head of the household and made all of the decisions.

This report presents the findings and implications of an 18-month Rural Livelihoods Monitoring Research Project. The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) and seven partner non-governmental organizations (NGOs) implemented the research project, which involved the monitoring of 390 households in 21 villages in seven districts in seven provinces. Information was gathered at the village and household level on human, financial, physical, and natural assets, with the aim of building understanding of rural livelihoods in Afghanistan and improving the monitoring and evaluation capacity of partner NGOs. This synthesis paper presents the key findings, implications, and recommendations from this research.

The motivation for the project was the observation that humanitarian action was generally not informed by a detailed understanding of rural livelihoods and that aid practice paid little attention to learning, instead primarily emphasizing delivery of aid built on assumptions about the significance of agriculture in rural livelihoods. By presenting and analyzing field-based evidence, this report aimed to influence policy and programming at the government and agency level, and thereby contribute to one of the government’s key objectives, that is, building sustainable livelihoods for rural Afghans.

The report found that the majority of households, both rich and poor, had diversified income sources and many were involved in a combination of farm and non-farm activities. For wealthier household’s livelihood diversity was usually a strategy of accumulation, while for poorer households’ diversity was more of a coping mechanism. For the poorest groups in 18 out of the 21 villages studied, non-farm labor, rather than agriculture, was the most important source of income. The importance of non-farm labor had significant implications for the agricultural focus of much of the then current rural programming and policy. The vital role of non-farm labor in rural Afghanistan necessitates that action be taken towards supporting the non-farm sector and improving people’s abilities to gain employment and income in this sector. The importance of non-farm labor in rural livelihoods must be recognized in 2004 (the authors argue this holds true in 2016).

For over a quarter of all households, labor migration, both inside and outside Afghanistan, was a critical income strategy. For wealthier household’s labor migration may have been a strategy of accumulation. However, for the poor it was a crucial way of coping with uneven job opportunities inside the village and a way of seeking better-paid work. Many households, rich and poor alike, were indebted and indebtedness was a factor in both the creation as well as the perpetuation of poverty. For wealthier households, loans were often taken either for ceremonies such as weddings, where a large lump sum was needed, or for the purposes of production and investment. For poorer households, the majority of loans were taken out as a coping strategy to meet basic needs such as food and health care.

The report also highlights that women in rural Afghanistan were involved in many production and income generating activities that contribute to the overall household income. Women possessed many skills that could (and did) provide income, such as carpet weaving, tailoring, embroidery, livestock management, and agricultural work such as weeding. However, due to a lack of recognition of women’s work in areas of agriculture, or a lack of business and marketing training, these activities often generated less income than was possible. Moreover, women tended to own far less land and far less livestock, and their income generating options were fewer in comparison to those of men. It is these inequities that made some female-headed households particularly vulnerable to poverty, as there were few activities that they could do that were sufficient to support a family. What the study makes apparent, however, is that it was more common for women to own livestock than land. The data on activities also show that women were very involved in
livestock management. Neither this ownership, nor women's role in livestock management, appeared to be reflected in the majority of programming linked to livestock. Projects targeting women rarely extended their remit beyond chickens, which were notoriously prone to disease and generated little income compared to other types of livestock.

The findings of this research have major ramifications for agricultural policy and programming, as it demonstrates that the needs of the rural poor were being missed due to a focus on agriculture. For example, if a household had land through which support could provide part of household food needs, then agricultural programming could play a large direct role. However, unless households had sufficient land to be able to sell or trade produce for expenditures, such as health and other expenses, it is likely that they would still be involved in non-farm labor, both to generate cash income as well as to spread risk. This was especially the case for women, and widows in particular, because women had less access to land than men and, despite often being involved in agriculture, were rarely considered in agricultural programming.


Afghans in 2008 have migrated widely to other countries and have developed intense international linkages; most farmers are no longer subsistence producers but depend on the market for their daily needs. Many livelihoods in 2008 depend on illicit market activities, notably poppy cultivation and opium trade. Rural women live behind a double mud curtain: the metaphorical one surrounding the village and the very real, tall, thick, and windowless mud wall surrounding each homestead, from which women are seldom permitted to venture out. Despite educational progress illiteracy is widespread. Most studies confirm female disadvantages in health, education, legal rights, social participation, protection from violence (domestic or otherwise), and other gender-related issues.

This article aims to fill a gap in the research and literature by presenting quantitative nationwide information on rural female employment as input for further research, policy design, and discussion of gender issues in Afghanistan. Data are drawn from the Nationwide Risk and Vulnerability Assessments (NRVA) of 2003 and 2005, covering all provinces and almost all districts.

Female activity was positively correlated with wealth: women in poor households participated in income-generating activities more than those in medium and better-off ones, and the very poor participated even more. Reports of women working were more frequent in the north, northeast, and west than in other regions; the lowest percentages were in the south. Two-thirds of employed rural women worked in agriculture or crafts. Embroidery and tailoring were clearly a mark of social standing; weaving and handicrafts were equally practiced across the social divide (albeit with different kinds of article in the different wealth levels), while farm work, gathering wood, and, especially, domestic service were snubbed by the better-off and practiced overwhelmingly by the very poor.

Average female wages were far below men’s pay for equivalent work. Female pay never approached the wage of male unskilled construction workers, even if some female jobs required higher skills and produced high-value products, as in the case of the famed Afghan embroidery and carpet-weaving handicrafts. The data, therefore, confirm the presumption that women are harshly discriminated against in the labor market.
These results offer just a glimpse into the complex issues of labor, employment, and the place of women in rural livelihoods that requires further research.


This paper examines how and why the livelihoods of 64 households from eight villages across the Badakhshan, Kandahar, and Sar-i-Pul Provinces changed between 2002 and 2009. It finds that while many experienced improvements in access to basic services since 2002, livelihood security declined for the majority. Changes outside of their control, including drought, the ban on opium poppy cultivation, and rising global food prices, led to large decreases in agricultural production or threatened food security.

Rural residents had carved diverse paths to securing their livelihoods throughout the political, social, and economic turbulence of the previous few decades. Their resilience in doing so, resting as it was on informal structures rooted in community relationships and only weakly supported by the state and market institutions, was remarkable. The contribution of women’s work cannot be overlooked. During this period of increasing livelihood insecurity, women’s activities grew in importance as both a source of cash income and a stopgap as households waited for remittances. However, gender norms defining the types and places of work acceptable for women limited how far women’s economic activities could contribute to diversification strategies. Of all 19 improving households, only one was able to achieve their position through an agriculture-based livelihood (i.e., one based on farming, livestock rearing, or off-farm agricultural processing activities). This raises serious questions over the viability of agriculture as a means to escape poverty in its own right.

Virtually all households who were able to maintain or improve their livelihood security did so by diversifying out of agriculture. Many respondent households were wary of engaging with markets, which raises questions about the strong emphasis in 2011 agriculture and rural development policy on market-oriented agricultural production. The level of cautiousness suggests that a more measured approach to market-led growth should be taken. In many areas, stabilizing livelihoods and achieving food security would seem to be first steps before encouraging increased market engagement. This means giving subsistence production equal attention in agriculture and rural development programs. For families in more remote regions with fewer viable options for market production, improving subsistence production can form part of a social protection strategy. This should be augmented with opportunities to access training and education so those wishing to leave agriculture can do so.

The considerable risks associated with agricultural livelihoods and doubts over the sector’s viability in the medium-term also point to the need to invest in urban development and job creation. Given that households’ pursuit of livelihood strategies is rarely confined to a single geographic space, these efforts should be part of a realistic rural development strategy. Rural development should not be about rural locations but about rural residents.

The data from this study are full of examples of inequality and dependence placing limits on the choices people have and their ability to succeed in pursuing them. Examples include gender norms, unequal employment relationships, sharecrop arrangements, and the ability of local powerholders in some villages to co-opt resources meant for the village as a whole. Aid actors need to
acknowledge the influence these systems have and identify ways to work with local communities to begin transforming them.


Food security in Afghanistan is partially determined by location, especially in terms of access to water and arable land. Based on water and geographic conditions, agricultural production can vary sharply from one valley to the next. Drought and conflict have heightened the effects of geographic vulnerability, creating mosaics of productive valleys and deeply drought-affected communities even within the same districts. This report seeks to explain the vulnerability to food insecurity in Afghanistan that existed at the beginning of the 21st century and how vulnerable individuals, households, and communities are coping with food insecurity. The report covers fieldwork undertaken from January to May 2002 in the north, central, southern, and western regions of Afghanistan. Data were collected from focus group interviews in thirteen provinces. Key informant discussions were conducted in fifteen provinces.

Since 1978, the protracted nature of conflicts, developed coping strategies to mitigate these threats, including migration, employment diversification, submission to political oppression, and taking up arms. While the problems of survival were enormous for many people, most individuals, households, and communities managed to live through many years of war. Vulnerability to food insecurity increased sharply despite the presence of foreign military/peacekeeping forces. Three (and in some places, four) successive years of drought have overwhelmed the capacity of Afghan communities to cope with the loss of agriculture and livestock production, unemployment, and burgeoning debt. Unlike conflict-related threats, Afghan households are less adept at coping with drought; among the over one thousand people interviewed in the focus groups, not a single individual could recall a similar drought in his or her life. The resulting chronic and transitory food insecurity in Afghanistan is widespread, deep, complex, and life-threatening.

The report presents information on how people coped with food insecurity during this period, for example: decreasing their dietary diversity, cutting out fruits, vegetables, meat, and dairy; increasing their consumption of poverty foods such as *sholeh,* *piawab,* and corn flour; reducing their food consumption by eating smaller amounts or skipping meals; mixing barley flour and legume flour with wheat flour; consuming new food sources, for example, intestines and commodities usually reserved for animals, such as *argan* (chicken feed) and *kunjarah* (livestock fodder); relying entirely on bread and tea; fathers leaving during mealtimes in order to ensure adequate food for the children; and sending children to stay with relatives. By this time, milk, meat, fruits, and vegetables had largely disappeared from the Afghan diet. Assets that had taken years (if not generations) to accumulate had been sold, eaten, stolen, burned, or had died. Families were so deeply indebted that they could not access new loans or, in many cases, even face their neighbors.

Intra-household relations and divisions of labor contributed to Afghan’s vulnerability to food insecurity. Women and female-headed households were likely to have greater difficulty accessing distant sources of water and fuel, relief distribution sites, and sources of credit and other inputs (wool, non-food items, etc.) in the district centers. Many widows lacked adequate access to land or to the draft animals, labor, and other inputs required for a successful harvest. Women also faced the threat of sexual violence and suffered from lack of representation and educational and employment opportunities. Female-headed households were often unable to benefit from food-for-work or cash-for-work programs, and therefore required targeted, sustained, and balanced
distributions of food aid rations. Migration and processes of urbanization had disrupted families, resulting in a transformation of intergenerational roles and relations. Elders had lost their important position as community leaders and mediators in dispute resolution.

Despite the tremendous increase in relief assistance, the depth and breadth of food insecurity in Afghanistan continued to challenge the effectiveness of short-term interventions. The majority of households in the survey had received assistance only one time, and the assistance was limited to wheat or wheat flour. While fleeting, these distributions did have positive effects on those households. However, the distributions were too limited and too infrequent to reverse the multi-year deterioration in food security that households had experienced (e.g., going deeply into debt, eating only starch-based commodities, selling off livestock and other key household assets). The food aid commodity baskets, for the most part, lacked diversity and therefore did not adequately alleviate what was one of the most pressing nutritional problems in the country, that is, micronutrient deficiencies.


Within the Afghanistan context, it is often assumed that rural livelihoods depend on agriculture and therefore that agricultural programming is one of the best ways of strengthening livelihoods. Because wheat seed programming is a common agricultural intervention that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) deliver in many areas of Afghanistan, it was felt that investigation of the impact of wheat seed programming would be a useful test of this assumption.

This study was conducted in three villages in the Dawlat Abad district of Faryab Province and three villages in the Sayyad district of Sar-e-pul Province. While agriculture was an important aspect of livelihoods in these villages, it was evident that a large proportion of men from poorer households depended on daily labor to make a living, and that a significant amount of daily labor work is construction work, not just agricultural work.

It was clear from talking with male and female villagers in all five villages that, whatever their wealth group status, they felt that improved wheat seed was of benefit to them. There was also consistency in what they thought of as “improved” wheat seed, which was seed that produced a better wheat harvest. If pressed, the villagers said this meant they wanted wheat seeds that provided wheat that was more resistant to disease than the varieties that they normally used, including wheat that did not lodge. They also frequently mentioned good quality flour for bread, which was usually defined as whiter flour that seemed to be synonymous in many interviewees’ minds with tastier bread. There were explicit links made between disease-free wheat and whiter flour.

Many NGOs justified the existence of seed programs in terms of encouraging the adoption of improved wheat seed, rather than in terms of providing wheat in places where that crop is lacking. The underlying assumption of many programs in relation to “improved” wheat seed appeared to be that use of improved wheat seed led to larger wheat harvests for those farmers who used it, and that this benefited the farmers and related households either/or both in terms of greater food security and/or improved livelihoods. However, this logic assumed three things, the first being that wheat seed was the primary factor determining a good wheat harvest. Yet it is evident that wheat seed is just one of many factors that influence a harvest; other factors include, for example, the quality of land, the weather, and the skill of the farmers. In the five villages studied, the major factor was perceived to be the amount, frequency, and availability of water. The second assumption
was that locally available wheat seed was worse than the introduced improved varieties. However, this study raised questions about how well-adapted some of the so-called improved wheat seed was to local conditions, not only in climatic terms, but in social and economic terms. For example, to be able to produce larger harvests some of the improved seeds required greater inputs (e.g., fertilizer and pesticides) than compared with more traditional or localized varieties; improved wheat seed was therefore more beneficial to those who could afford the cost of inputs rather than to those who could not. The third assumption was that increasing the wheat harvest would automatically lead to improved food security and/or livelihoods for the farmers concerned. Wheat was a staple that many farmers, particularly sharecroppers, were largely growing for subsistence use. Therefore, the assumption that improved wheat seed would improve food security seemed logical. However, where wheat was used for barter or sale in order to buy other items, including those that contributed to food security from a nutritional perspective, an improved harvest results in the price of wheat dropping, which could actually diminish the food security of a household because the lower value decreased their purchasing ability.

This report shows that the supposed link between improved wheat seed and improved food security and livelihoods is not always as straightforward or plausible as it might first appear. There are many other factors involved at the household level, including the degree to which a particular household is involved in wheat cultivation; likewise, many poorer households are less directly involved than is often assumed. At a regional and national level, it may be possible to claim with more confidence that food security is enhanced through use of improved wheat seed. Other problems that reduce the effectiveness of improved wheat seed programs—the quality and appropriateness of some varieties of so-called improved seed, delays in delivery of seed, farmers’ lack of understanding of the changes in farm practices needed to produce a better harvest with the improved seed—also blur the picture. In such situations, so-called improved wheat seed programs may actually lead to a decrease in food security.


The purpose of this report is to contribute to a greater understanding of the roles women and men play in the different stages of agriculture and other production and income-generating activities. Little prior research existed on gender roles within Afghanistan and the focus of most research and programming was still the “household”. This focus often obscures intrahousehold gender relations and roles, which are crucial factors in determining access to, and control over, livelihood opportunities.

The research for this study took place in five villages in two provinces of Afghanistan (Faryab and Sar-e-pul). It was conducted over a two-and-a-half-week period, leaving around two days per village. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were carried out with different groups of women and men in the five villages. The interviews were open-ended but were based on a set of key questions.

All villages contained both landed and landless families. The proportions of each differed from village to village but in general there were more landless than landed families. While unmarried and married women may have had access to the produce from the land for consumption, they rarely owned this very valuable asset. Men could be involved in all agricultural activities, whereas women from landowning households, widely considered to be wealthier households, appeared to be much less active on the land; only poor women worked on the land. Women were generally not allowed
to work on the land “because of culture.” Though women worked with male household members in some aspects of sharecropping, all of the sharecroppers themselves appeared to be male. Farming experience and expertise was needed to gain work as a sharecropper, experience and expertise that women could not gain due to the restricted agricultural activities they performed.

Very few women worked on wheat fields and there appeared to be a gendering of crops, with, for example, melon being more of a female crop. In some cases, the research team was told that women worked on melon fields because they were closer to the home in comparison with the wheat fields. Women worked mostly on their own household’s vegetable plots. Some women were involved in agricultural activities inside the house; for example, they helped clean and prepare the seed, or moved the wheat for storage and separated the wheat from the husk in preparation for making flour; some dried tomatoes or melons; some made jam from melon for the winter as well as dried grapes with the men. The sale of agricultural (or any other) produce was mostly the domain of men. No women, except for elderly widows, traveled to the bazaar to sell or buy goods. This meant that it was possible women found it difficult to make decisions over how money was spent.

Taking all the villages together, women’s non-farm labor activities were largely gili̇m (flat-weave carpet) weaving, sewing, and tailoring. For some landless household’s carpet weaving was the main source of income. Carpet weaving is still a very lengthy and physically difficult process. Some women reportedly started eating opium because it helped to lessen the pain and enabled them to stay awake. What the report does not show, however, is how these activities affected women’s self-esteem and whether these skills earned them respect with other women and men. The men did not appear to highly value these activities and saw them as very minor activities. These activities did not appear to improve women’s bargaining power within the household.

Economic reasoning can sometimes play a larger role than cultural norms in determining the allocation of labor. In general, however, women’s activities, perhaps especially in agriculture, were often invisible, partly because many were carried out inside the home or compound and partly because their activities were not discussed if they went against the socio-cultural norms of what women should be doing. More effort is needed to understand the activities that women and men undertake in different places and how these roles both stem from and serve to reinforce gender relations, decision-making, and well-being.

This study shows that the livelihoods of households in these five villages were made up of many different types of activities carried out at different times of the year by different household members. Rural livelihoods were diverse and no one person was involved in only one activity. Activities should not be seen in isolation from one another, as they typically form a complicated picture of how a household builds its livelihood. To understand livelihoods, it is therefore necessary to understand what these activities are, when they take place (e.g., seasonality), and where they take place (e.g., inside or outside the compound) in order to begin to understand how new programs may impact existing roles.

predatory and arbitrary. This report explores the livelihood pathways of households under such circumstances from 2002/03 to 2008/09. Researchers visited 24 households in three villages in Badakhshan, eight per village, as part of a larger study looking at livelihood changes in four provinces in Afghanistan. Part of the argument made in the research proposal was that much of the effort in the Afghanistan state-building exercise had focused on building formal state institutions and establishing formal legal structures of governance, law, security, and markets, whereas little attention had been paid to existing traditional institutions.

The study draws attention to the corporate nature of villages, using the concept of “village republics” to identify their capacity to manage themselves and provide public goods, notably security, which the Afghan state and markets had failed to deliver. But the capacity of villages to fulfill this role was variable. In recognition of this discrepancy, the three study villages were characterized as “developmental,” “warrior,” and “defensive” in terms of their behavior and outcomes. Individuals, location, history, and ecology have all influenced, in a determinate way, pathways of change.

The findings show that most of the study households were worse off than they were prior to 2001, although most experienced a brief period of relative prosperity based on the one market choice available: opium poppy. In all three villages, many of the poorer households rationed food during 2008/09 in order to survive. The decline in their circumstances was evidenced by the disposal of key assets; other households, either through larger asset holdings or good luck, had managed to maintain the status quo. Of the five households that prospered across all three villages, only two did so through agriculture. There was a limited agricultural future in Badakhshan’s mountain economy, and there was a danger that marginal increases in productivity would keep people on the land but keep them poor, thus creating an agricultural poverty trap. The paper argues, therefore, that what Badakhshan needs is more employment opportunities.

The research includes five detailed case studies that investigated the increasing difficulty in getting married, the role of marriage, and its consequences for the participants. The imperative to marry and the desire to establish a strong, large household were central to achieving physical and economic security. While social norms clearly determined gendered specialization within the household (reducing the need for negotiation over roles and individual benefits), there was more room for maneuver than expected. But allegiance to the household as an institution was absolute, given the economic (and to some extent physical) security that it provided, and individuals were aware of the compromises to autonomy that this entailed. Rather than seeing the Afghan household and village as exceptional and problematic in their formation and operation, it would be wise to recognize that, despite their variability and costs they impose, they are the only stable institutions available. They deserve less judgement, more understanding, and better support.

A key lesson that can be drawn from this Badakhshan case study is that institutions outside the formal concerns of state-building—the village and the household—have proved to be remarkably durable and capable of providing a degree of security and welfare for most individuals.


Technological interventions aimed at improving livelihoods and bring gender equity can become successful only when the prevailing gender roles in society and access to different livelihood
opportunities are fully understood. This article analyzes gender roles in agriculture in the conservative patriarchal society of Afghanistan.

The research involved an informal rapid appraisal conducted during 2006–2009 to give a qualitative understanding of the farming systems; the second phase of the project began in 2010 and ran till 2013. Focus group interviews, participatory resource mapping, were conducted in seven villages in Nangarhar and in Baghlan provinces of Afghanistan. Each focus group included eight to ten key informants (farmers) from each village and two to three interdisciplinary scientists (with at least one woman scientist). In these groups’ participants discussed ideas, issues, insights, and experiences with facilitation by a moderator. Group dynamics helped to elicit useful and detailed information on each topic. Educated women coordinators, facilitators, and activists and well established women’s groups were used to reach and target key women informants as they are not allowed to interact directly with male researchers.

All the villages in both the provinces contained both landed and landless families. The proportion of each differed from village to village, but in general there were more landless than landed families. Almost all farming families were subsistence farmers. The irrigation facilities available were negligible and cultivation was mostly rain-fed, resulting in low productivity. Wheat, cotton, maize, rice, melon, potato, and vegetables were the crops cultivated in these villages. With limited land and water resources, the male labor force tended to migrate to urban areas in search of a livelihood. Landless families maintained a few animals (cows, sheep, and goats) for their livelihood.

The results from this survey indicated that men’s participation was higher than women’s in livestock and crop-related activities in both the provinces. Though overall women’s participation was less than men’s, women’s participation was higher in livestock-related activities compared to crop production activities, a finding similar to that of other studies conducted in the past in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The number of agricultural/livestock activities carried out by women depended on the land/livestock ownership of her family. Poorer women tended to be more involved in agricultural tasks than wealthier women. A family was considered poor if the women worked on land, and there appeared to be a stigma attached to this. Most off-farm activities, such as buying fertilizers and chemicals, selling products and by-products, buying seeds, marketing, and other post-harvest activities, were the responsibility of men. Women were largely associated with threshing, hauling, and cleaning. Women’s participation in non-farm work largely consisted of carpet weaving, sewing, and tailoring.

Although men discussed issues with women, decision-making was done by men only, whether it was related to agriculture, livestock, or any other family matter. Incomes were largely controlled by men. During focus group interviews, it became clear that incomes from goats were largely used by women and children for purchasing shoes and clothes. Women appeared to be able to sell livestock produce and sometimes make decisions over how to use the income thus generated. In the patriarchal family system, particularly in Afghanistan, men were mostly involved in formal economic and social affairs and decision-making processes in the community and family. Men were not in favor of women owning property because it would increase the role of women in decision-making.

This study shows that women’s involvement was less than men’s in both livestock and crop-related activities. Age, social stigma, poverty, and a shortage of labor influenced the gender division of labor, decision-making ability, and participation in farm and non-farm activities. Women and children were the main tenders of animals; women were responsible for tethering, feeding, and cleaning animals, and boys for grazing them. These findings indicate that any agricultural
development program intending to involve women will be effective only if it has a large component of livestock-related activities.


This paper reports results from participatory gender-sensitive research undertaken in Afghanistan (Baghlan and Nangarhar) and Pakistan (Balochistan and Punjab) which aimed at unravelling gender roles in agricultural activities in conservative societies. As women were not allowed to directly interact with male researchers, educated women coordinators, facilitators, activists were used to reach women beneficiaries.

In Afghanistan and Pakistan, livestock played a crucial role in the fulfilment of basic subsistence requirements for the poor. Men were responsible for herding, preparing/purchasing feed, and making up shelter for livestock. On top of other home activities, women were responsible for tethering, milking, processing milk, barn cleaning, preparing dung cakes, and disposal of animal wastes. Cleaning/washing, feeding, watering, collecting forage, and marketing animals and their products were done both by men and women. In general, women’s work varied from place to place in Afghanistan. Among most settled rural families, women participated in agricultural work only during light harvesting periods and were responsible for the production of milk products. Some women specialized in handicrafts such as carpet and felt-making. Nomadic women cared for young lambs and kids and made a wide variety of dairy products for sale as well as family use. They spun the wool sheared by men and wove the fabric from which their tents are made. Felt-making for yurt coverings and household rugs was also a female activity. The results indicate that in Afghanistan women and children are the main tenders of animals; boys took animals for grazing, whereas women and girls took care of newborn and sick animals, milking, collecting fodder, and stable feeding.

In Afghanistan, females were largely responsible for weeding, harvesting, and threshing. Men undertook seed preparation, fertilization, spraying, threshing, hauling, cleaning, marketing, buying seeds, buying fertilizers and chemicals, and selling products and by-products. Males were also involved in hired cropping activities, such as seed and land preparation, plowing, transplanting, broadcasting, weeding, fertilization, spraying, hauling, cleaning, and harvesting. Females’ involvement as hired labor was limited; when it happened, the women were hired for activities such as broadcasting, fertilization, threshing, hauling, cleaning, and sometimes marketing.

Some striking information from the Baghlan-e-Sanhadi district of Afghanistan is that traditional customs prohibited recording the number of females in a family. Muslim men can marry up to four wives and national censuses have never been accurate. This may mean that women can easily be ignored from future development plans, worsening their situation.

This paper shows the magnitude of women’s involvement in and knowledge of livestock rearing. Therefore, any investment program for livestock in rural areas of Afghanistan (and Pakistan) should consider women’s participation in the planning and implementation phases.

This study uses gender analysis as a way to improve the understanding of each gender’s activities, access to resources, and the opportunities and constraints they face relative to each other. In the Afghan context gender is a key determinant of the enjoyment of the right to participate in public life, with constraints attributed to cultural and social norms that are often justified by interpretations of Islamic religious principles. In each field site the study aimed to find out what are some of the gender-based norms, roles, and responsibilities involved in household-level decision-making. The primary field site was an Uzbek village in the Hazrat-e Sultan District, and the secondary site was a Tajik village in the Khoram District.

Several findings from this study were revealed, relating to leadership, participatory institutions, and the factors that constrain women's participation in decision-making. For example, women and most of the younger men were thought to have no knowledge about anything outside of the household, creating a barrier to their participation in village-level initiatives as well as in speaking with outsiders. Village men used the language of “democracy,” “participation,” and “rights” when communicating with outsiders, but there was confusion and a lack of will when it came to the application of these concepts to the participation of women. Men were aware that external agents wanted to hear these phrases, but in practice were finding new ways for those with power to share it among themselves. Violence against women was used as a way of reinforcing women’s adherence to local purdah norms, including mobility. This was a serious constraint to promoting women’s participation. These findings make it all the more important for aid staff to understand local gender dynamics and develop initiatives that ensure women’s participation is seen as acceptable, while also increasing knowledge of alternative ways to deal with conflict other than violence.

The author specifically highlights how men tended to outwardly portray the appearance of being willing to give permission for women to engage in income-generation activities. But at the time of this research, such permissions had not materialized. Women’s participation in the village decision-making process were non-existent on a formal level and were extremely difficult to identify on an informal level.


Afghan farmers aim to achieve livelihood security within a wide diversity of agricultural systems and production conditions. However, while different forms of farming combined with animal husbandry represent the major livelihood strategies of rural Afghans, there are only a few households that command the resources necessary to achieve subsistence and self-sufficiency. This is true for irrigated agriculture in the fertile river oases of the country, but even more so for rural communities in remote mountain locations with low crop diversity, who fully depend on rain-fed agriculture and have constrained access to off-farm incomes. This article aimed to deepen understanding about the functioning of combined rain-fed farming systems and the multiple insecurities to which they are exposed. Focusing on a village community and intergroup relations in the district of Ishkamesh in the northern Afghan province of Takhar, this article demonstrates how Afghan rain-fed mountain farmers managed to construct their livelihoods in high-risk environments with limited access to key natural resources that influence both agricultural production and livelihood decision-making.
The article is based on three field visits to the Ishkamesh area between 2007 and 2009, during which three focus groups and open individual interviews were held with mountain farmers in the village of Dara-e Kalan. Open interviews were also held with landless pastoral groups (Gujar) engaged in mobile livestock keeping who lived in the village surroundings. In addition, the natural resource basis and land use systems of the mountain village were assessed and mapped. The limitations of the study are that it was not made possible to talk to women in the community and directly explore their roles in agriculture and animal husbandry.

Ishkamesh has been characterized by high levels of violence and conflict-ridden intergroup relations. The matter was a delicate one because all groups that had been involved in those past upheavals then needed to coexist in a continuum of conflict over scarce resources and cooperation for mutual benefit. The landed Tajik, Uzbek, and Pashai communities engaged in rain-fed agricultural production that was highly vulnerable to drought conditions. This was combined with the practice of seasonal animal husbandry that used high-altitude mountain pastures in the environs of village settlements. The Gujar profited from their reputation as renowned experts in animal husbandry but had no access to arable land at all.

The saying of one villager that “one year of good rain and snow is much more effective than ten years of development aid” illustrates the actualities of the existing drought conditions and water scarcity that threatened the livelihoods of the rural poor in Afghanistan. Ishkamesh is an area where agricultural activity is entirely based on rain-fed farming under conditions of severe water shortage. Because wheat is the single staple crop of the Ishkamesh district, the landscape follows the somewhat uniform cropping pattern that is characteristic of rain-fed systems where wheat is grown. The limited productivity of rain-fed agriculture led to harvests that were insufficient for complete subsistence. This was true even on larger landholdings and in favorable years. Thus, annual household food requirements could never be met and needed to be supplemented from the market. These adverse production conditions led to a pronounced reliance on migration strategies, which made remittances a significant proportion of household livelihood portfolios in rain-fed farming systems.

The existence of certain sharecropping practices that enabled landless farmers to access agricultural produce, the interlocking of rain-fed farming with animal husbandry, and the selling of land only within the community to foster group solidarity all represent some of the strategies used to deal with growing insecurities. However, there remained a mounting pressure on agricultural land resources that could only be partly addressed through additional social and economic strategies such as labor migration and pastoralism. The case of Ishkamesh provides ample evidence about the “security strategies” that people in Afghanistan employ to deal with threats, conflicts, and livelihood insecurities accruing from local contexts.


This article explores issues of religious belief and symbolic evaluation in relation to the pastoral practices of an ethnographically privileged non-Islamic people of central Asia: the so-called Kafirs (Arabic-Persian “unbelievers”) of the Hindu Kush mountains on the borders of eastern Afghanistan and northwest Pakistan. The Kafirs, and their present-day Islamic descendants in Afghan Nuristan, the Kalasha, are not exclusive pastoralists, for agriculture also has an important although culturally devalued role in their subsistence economy. Livestock husbandry, however, has had a paramount ritual and ideological significance in being segregated from all other activities as
an exclusively male and sacred domain, where transhumant herding is almost the sole subsistence occupation of the male population.

Among the Kalasha of Chitral, whose traditional religion is uniquely preserved in this region, contrasting livestock values associated with goat husbandry are related to a basic dichotomization of the natural environment into “pure” and “impure” ritual spheres. This symbolic dichotomy, between male-pastoral and female-domestic domains, conceptually accommodates and orchestrates basic features of sexual polarity and antagonism that appear to be characteristic of both contemporary Kalasha social organization and that of their Kafir neighbors in pre-Islamic times.

Physically isolated in their narrow valleys, the Kalasha practice a subsistence economy that combines small-scale agriculture with transhumant livestock husbandry. A strict division of labor between the sexes coincides with this dual subsistence economy. The care of livestock and all related tasks of dairy production are assigned exclusively to men. Kalasha herdsmen practice a form of alpine transhumance. Pastoral practice in the mountains demands and encourages cooperation, unlike land tenure and agricultural production in the valleys, which tends to divide Kalasha communities, isolating households as autonomous units and promoting fractious rivalry among kinsmen. The pastoral world is highly valued as a perfect realization of communal solidarity. Women, conversely, undertake all but the most arduous work in the fields, repeatedly weeding and watering the crops throughout summer, harvesting and winnowing grain in autumn, and milling flour, as well as performing domestic chores in the villages.

Men and women tend to inhabit distinct and geographically remote spheres of activity for some five months of the year. Kalasha men therefore seasonally experience two alternative social orders: the exclusively masculine environment of the summer camps in the pastures, and the mixed heterosexual world of the villages. This opposition is even artificially maintained during winter through the ritually segregated zone of the goat stables. A man thus periodically passes back and forth between two modes of society—the pastoral and the domestic—which otherwise never meet directly.

The majority of married men are absent for several months in the mountain pastures during summer, giving rise to numerous opportunities for extramarital liaisons, which necessarily instigate elopements. There is evidence of seemingly identical customs of elopement and bride-wealth (what the groom pays to the bride’s family when they marry), together with the ritual expression of sexual polarity and antagonism, among the pre-Islamic Kafir tribes of Afghanistan. Similar forms of competitive “wife-stealing” are reported for contemporary Nuristani peoples as well as among other mountain communities in the Hindu Kush and Karakorum, where the traditional pastoral economy remains dominant. The author therefore suggests that such patterns of “sexual anarchy,” reflected in a prominent ritual opposition between male and female operative spheres, may be generally characteristic of transhumant mountain communities throughout this region of highland Asia: occurring wherever the male population is preoccupied with livestock husbandry.
3. Conclusion

3.1. Family, Kinship, Religion, Tradition: How to Nurture Solidarity and Reconstruction

Despite the often-heard claims that increased female participation results in positive economic and societal outcomes, the question of which policy actions can promote female empowerment remains a topic of contention. This is even more the case in countries such as Afghanistan that are highly traditional and religiously conservative (Beath et al. 2013, 551).

The literature demonstrates that Afghan women, like men, have supported anticolonial and pro-nationalist indigenous regimes. Like men, women are fearful of change that weakens kinship ties and therefore social and economic dependencies. Women want to be morally upright believers; women feel that their faith endows them with the will to keep their husbands and children on the path of God; women hate the Afghan fundamentalists, not Islam; and women feel a sense of security within the household, and sometimes fear modernization that may confuse and complicate their daily lives by disrupting “traditional” institutions (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003, 9).

Given the present conditions of life in Afghanistan, punctuated by chronic crises and weak governance, religion and family is frequently perceived as the only force able to reinstate a sense of nationhood, kinship solidarity, and economic and political empowerment. The family lies at the heart of Afghan society and has proven over time to be the only stable institution available (Dupree 2004; Eggerman and Panter-Brick 2010, 81). Although the presence of international organizations centered on the protection of Afghan women are integral to the safeguarding of women’s rights, giving the appearance of more actively promoting women’s job security over men’s—in a society that possesses a strong patriarchal structure and hierarchically organizes men above women—can be detrimental to the overall safety of Afghan women. What is also sometimes conveniently overlooked in development programs is that women, however marginalized, more often than not share the same political views as the men in their communities (including views about women’s appropriate place and conduct).

Afghan society adopts a hegemonic masculinity model where men are the principal wage earners. As employment is scarce, and men more frequently find themselves in the role of homemaker rather than primary breadwinner, masculinity becomes threatened by women who work. Hence, employment in Afghanistan seems to be a sphere where men are further emasculated, rather than a sphere where masculinity can be championed.

As Gilani (2008, 56–59) has poignantly pointed out, it is likely that the liberal model that is espoused by the West may not be the most promising to secure peace and stability in Afghanistan. Hence, human rights organizations need to rethink their mode of assistance and structure their aid in a way that causes little disruption to the organization of gender roles within the host society without compromising the human rights of Afghan women. Aid organizations must ensure that they do not overlook the significance of the roles that men generally occupy within this traditionally patriarchal society. Attention also needs to be directed at helping men recover from the protracted conflicts that have plagued the region. Although aid organizations must persist in ensuring that women’s rights continue to be respected during this transition process, they must also recognize that the renegotiation of gender roles needs to occur gradually over a period of time. It is likely that any immediate reshaping of gender roles may further inflame the crisis in masculinity that Afghan men are already undergoing. It is very possible that these traditional institutions of asserting masculinity may not develop in a manner that is identical to the West, which is to say that women may still be subordinate to men within familial relationships and men may still be the sole
wage earners. Yet, in a society that has always been extremely patriarchal, this sort of development can be seen as somewhat expected.  

Bahri (2014) found that Afghan men make a variety of arguments against gender equality, but there is little evidence that the mainstream development community has sought to understand their points of view and devise counter-arguments. Efforts to promote positive changes in the condition of women in Afghanistan must necessarily take into consideration men’s understanding of masculinity. Since labels and concepts as understood by the West have different meanings for Afghan men, terminology must be amended to reflect the Afghan men’s understanding of these concepts. Placing less focus on the economic reasons for women’s participation in society and focusing more on the benefits to the family may contribute to an expanded role for women being accepted. To increase the support of Afghan men for gender equality, gender initiatives should therefore include men in their programs. Furthermore, instead of trying to impose Western values on Afghan men, a deeper and more sensitive approach to social and religious values is crucial to making a difference to the status of women in Afghanistan.

More ethical and realistic policy goals would need to address the everyday priorities of ordinary Afghans. Through an understanding of the priorities, we reveal the structural violence of poverty, which is often overlooked because of the dramatic violence of war, and the importance of maintaining personal and social dignity as the key to a hopeful future. In a qualitative study conducted in 2006 on the violence of everyday life, social suffering, and resilience, the authors found that “Afghans articulated a forceful, policy-relevant message: there is no health without mental health, no mental health without family unity, no family unity without work, dignity, and a functioning economy, and no functioning economy without good governance” (Eggerman and Panter-Brick 2010, 82). These findings indicate that interventions focusing on everyday social ecology—strengthening family and wider social networks—need to go hand in hand with interventions focusing on everyday material ecology, that is, altering the daily economic stressors that are the nexus of social suffering.

In a context of widening social inequalities, maldistribution of capital, and inequitable state policies, people are suffering from an ever-shrinking sense of hope, a feeling of entrapment or “going nowhere” in terms of existential and social mobility. Under such circumstances, the household (along with the village) could prove to be the main source of safety and economic security. Yet the household and village have consistently been neglected by developers and policymakers due to an emphasis on “modernizing” Afghanistan’s public spheres of state and market, with the assumption that these would drag the private spheres of village and household out of their tradition-burdened past. Indeed, the village has been treated as an enduring symbol of rural backwardness and

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9 Gilani (2008) points out how “human rights organizations and activists flooding the country are appropriating the role of fathers as primary teachers of morality.” The author goes on:

Media and activists are continually imposing upon the population new ideological models which emphasise equalising the rights of women and which are often perceived as reflecting Western rhetoric and foreign values. Disciplining of women and children, traditionally a matter left in the hands of the male head-of-household, is being severely restricted by the myriad human rights organisations moving into the country. This is, of course, not to say that the respect for women and the rule of law is inappropriate or wrong, but that such impositions result in crises in self-identity among the men and women that comprise a patriarchal society, where men and women are ordered hierarchically. By assuming responsibilities that were traditionally fulfilled by the father figure, these organisations are threatening the traditional family unit in Afghan society. (62–63)

10 Other scholars discuss the complexity and challenges faced by civil society organizations working to end violence against women in occupied Afghanistan and warn against solving those intricacies by a focus on religion alone. International aid agencies and academics should not overlook the implications of instrumentalizing faith-based movements in the name of gender equality. At the same time “it is nevertheless crucial for aid agencies not to fall into the trap of benevolent patriarchy – that is, encouraging men to be nicer, rather than considering how gendered privileges and roles have impacted their lives” (Wu 2012, 14).
tradition, not least for its containment of women.\textsuperscript{11} Maletta, for example, wrote of rural women “living behind a double mud curtain: the metaphorical one surrounding the village and the very real, thick and windowless mud-wall surrounding each homestead from which women are seldom permitted to venture out” (2003, 175–6). Such a viewpoint is a short step from talking about the “condition of Afghan women,” making comparisons with international indices of women’s well-being (health and education, for example) in which Afghanistan ranks low. Attention is also drawn to the poor position of women in relation to men with respect to rights and social participation and their exposure to violence within the home. But treating women as a category, and a tendency to portray them as victims, is based on assumptions about their lives inside the household. On gender, the agenda of donor organizations takes the normative view that individuality, agency, and autonomy within the context of a market economy are desirable. This agenda appears to be blind to the circumstances within which Afghan households live, the significance of the household as an institution, and the reasons for the rules of obligation and loyalty that structure it.

Pain (2010, 39–40) recounts how much of the recent literature on gender has focused on the role and rights of Afghan women as economic agents. This has included women’s participation in the labor market and its limits; their role in agriculture, which is greater than many believe, and ownership of assets revealing the disjuncture between what Sharia says with respect to inheritance and what customary practices permit. Studies of credit confirm a picture of women actively involved in both informal and formal credit systems. The post-2001 literature on women in Afghanistan reflects a wider tendency to treat gender as a subject rather than as a social relationship. If gender were treated as a social relationship, and therefore exposed to bargaining and conflicts, a critical understanding of “patriarchy” would emerge. While the “benevolent patriarch” model is something to be avoided by researchers to explain gender relations, this is partly how Afghan men see gender relations working in actuality. However, these men (to different degrees) realize that successful spousal relations must involve consultation; likewise, the men’s wives also have ways of wielding power.

As Pain (2010, 51–52) reminds us: “The first function of a household and the community within which it lives is to provide the physical security that cannot be assured from outside and to maximize its chances and those of its individual members to gain economic security. All else is secondary. The ‘traditional’ Afghan household with its norms and structures clearly does not carry with it the notion of the pursuit of individual advantage. Nor is it clear, as matters stand, that such a pursuit would be to its benefit.” Dupree (2004, 329) also comments that “as shaky as it is, in some instances, the household is the only stable institution available.” Rather than seeing the Afghan household and its structural social norms as exceptional and problematic in their formation and operation, it can be argued that it should be seen as something more usual and necessary. The first step in the investigation of the potential for a bottom-up state-building strategy is determining what works locally. This literature review has found solid evidence that the village and the household are the cornerstones of securing an allegiance, whatever the costs, because they offer what is unavailable elsewhere in Afghanistan: an institutional landscape.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{11} It is worth noting that the notion itself of “village” and its fluid and pluralistic nature is not fully grasped by the central government: “On the one hand, rural residents do not think and act in terms of clearly (territorially) delimited spaces in their everyday interaction. Rather, their frame of reference seems to be a socio-economic space in which they are active for their daily routines and which is structured by face-to-face social network relationships. On the other hand, I witnessed a clear tendency of government-initiated activities to penetrate rural spaces and to define them administratively by assigning proper names to some settlements and registering these in official records via the current implementation processes ...” (Mielke 2007, 2). How successfully the central government actually permeated the provinces in terms of enforcement capacity and real influence in shaping local policies remains largely unknown and has not been the subject of any extensive investigation.

\textsuperscript{12} In a study of customary village organizations, Afghanistan is defined as “at best a fragile state and at worst a failed state.” Nevertheless, public goods are found to be provided routinely and effectively in villages throughout the
3.2. Beyond Agriculture? The Strategic Value of Diversification

Following the ousting of the Taliban in 2001, the government of Afghanistan developed the National Solidarity Program (NSP) as a means to promote rural development in Afghanistan. The program is focused on building representative institutions for village governance and on delivering services and infrastructure to Afghanistan’s rural population, but also explicitly mentions promoting gender equality as one of the program’s main goals (Beath et al. 2013, 543–44). But what is the role of women in agriculture? Or rather, do they play any significant role in agriculture? Data around the topic remain somewhat contrasting.

It can be stated that the primary role of rural Afghan women is in the household, taking care of children and family obligations. Though women also look after livestock and tend to small plots of land, few of them own such assets (Beath et al. 2013, 542). Women generally lack ownership, control, and access to productive assets and their inheritance rights are often bypassed. Stated bluntly: In a context where the majority of women are unable to read or write, risk their lives in childbirth, have no access to roads, safe water supplies, schools or medical facilities, capabilities and rights are severely restricted. The most pressing task will be securing access to these basic entitlements that constitute the bedrock of any amelioration in women’s lives and their capacity for participation” Kandiyoti (2007, 192). This capacity for participation applies in a broader sense and not only, or mainly, in agriculture. It is clear that Afghan custom would ideally keep most women inside the home for the sake of family honor; however, this is unlikely to be possible in order for households to make an adequate livelihood. There is a need to further examine the frequent dichotomy between Afghan culture’s ideal gender roles and the ways that women participate in household livelihoods in reality. It is likely that the cultural values which Afghans often express (especially to strangers or “outsiders”) do not always reflect the way that households’ function in reality. To date, the household division of labor and the role that women play in agricultural activity in Afghanistan is not well understood.

The most comprehensive study on gender roles in agriculture (Grace 2004), which the literature keeps referring back to in varying degrees, shows that women have distinctive experience of looking after animals as well as making dairy products from them. The possibility of supporting groups of women to build up stocks of livestock could therefore be further explored in order to generate income for women and their households both from dairy products as well as from the sale of animals. Some women also have experience of working in some of the most profitable areas of agriculture, such as cultivating melons, orchards, and vineyards. The possibility of using common land for women’s orchards or vineyards and accessing markets through those women able to leave the village, could be explored. This would provide women and their families with

country. Disputes are normally resolved at the local level. Moreover, water, land resources, and access to credit are generally maintained through community rules and norms. Customary organizations emerge as the primary source of order in Afghanistan; they are a relative constant amid political chaos; they do not have the uniformity of standards associated with formal bodies; they evolve over time and are particularly resilient. While state builders have treated these organizations as embodiments of a conservative political culture that disenfranchises women or exploits peasants, the author emphasizes the productive role of local politics for the study of state building in post-conflict or fragile environments (Brick 2008).

13 The survey by Grace (2004) was conducted over a two-and-a-half-week period, around two days per village. Semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions were carried out with different groups of women and men in five villages. The author of the report acknowledges that the time spent in each village was limited; gaining an understanding of certain aspects of gender roles and relations was therefore very difficult. To obtain an understanding of decision-making would necessitate spending a much longer time in each village, as greater trust would need to be built up.
extra income and may enable them to have more decision-making power. The assumption that an increased economic contribution leads to increased decision-making power, which in turn translates into increased well-being, should, however, be tested and further understood in this context.

In general, it appears that the richer the household, the less the women work on land. This is due to a stigma attached to women working on land, as it denotes that the family is poor. Few women, mainly poorer women, participate in agricultural activities (Maletta 2008, 192). This stigma needs to be taken into consideration if programs want to involve women more in agriculture, as there may be social costs involved along with the economic benefits.

It is also possible that women are working on the land more than is officially admitted, as the public comments often describe what women should be doing in terms of the socio-cultural norms, but not necessarily what they are doing. Additionally, whether women view small vegetable plots within the compound as agriculture, given that this is mostly for household consumption, is unclear. Activity relating to these plots is usually not mentioned until asked about by the researcher. This demonstrates the need to both observe what is going on as well as to ask about all possible types of agricultural activities (Grace 2004, 7). Other qualitative studies confirm that women are often in secondary positions to men within agricultural systems and have less control over the assets, resources, and profits. Additionally, there is evidence that female labor is underreported due to research methods that do not always include agricultural activities in which women often participate, such as threshing and food processing (Gilmour 2007, 32).

The only study focusing specifically on wheat agriculture and its impact on livelihoods, although it does not consider gender, calls into question the common assumption that rural livelihoods depend on agriculture and therefore that agricultural programming is one of the best ways of strengthening livelihoods (Coke 2004). Wheat seed programs are a common agricultural intervention that NGOs deliver in many different areas of Afghanistan. The author outlines how drought, and before that conflict, have brought about changes in livelihood strategies. If improving rural livelihoods is one of the purposes of an improved wheat seed program, then interventions need to become more sophisticated in order to support not only landowners but the strategies of those without land. This would include support not only for agricultural-related activities but to non-agricultural activities as well; the latter might include building non-farm skills in areas where daily labor can command greater wages or exploring ways to ensure carpet-making households secure better returns for their efforts through credit and giving support to remittance mechanisms where needed. In terms of seed-related programs themselves, the recommendations that emerge from the study by Coke (2004) include ensuring that seed varieties to be introduced are tested locally by farmers themselves in small trials before being distributed widely (to ensure that the seeds are appropriate for local conditions and that farmers are able to follow any new practices that will be required); and finding out about local seed systems in order to ensure that the project methodology does not undermine any effective local practice that already exist.

Household strategies do not rely solely on agriculture, and sometimes families are economically dependent on other means of living, especially migrant labor to urban areas (Coke 2004, 18). A paper examining how and why the livelihoods of households across the Badakhshan, Kandahar, and Sar-e-pul provinces have changed between 2002 and 2009 found that virtually all households who were able to maintain or improve their livelihood security did so by diversifying out of agriculture. The considerable risks associated with agricultural livelihoods and doubts over the sector’s viability in the medium to long-term clearly point to the need for investment in urban development and job creation (Kantor and Pain 2011, 1–2). Evidence from the Balkh, Herat, and Nangarhar provinces suggests that there is likely to be irreversible damage to communities that
rly on agriculture as the main source of food and income because of climate change and market functioning (e.g. price volatility) makes it hard to sustain a stable income (Mihran 2011, 65–68).

A research project conducted during 2002/03 to 2008/09 clearly points to a considerable degree of diversification in rural household economies; migration was common and many villagers drew a significant part of their income (in cash and kind) from non-farm labor (Pain 2010). These findings challenge the widespread assumption that 80% of Afghanistan’s population is dependent on agriculture. This raises a number of important questions: What practices have households implemented, under diverse contexts of conflict, in relation to market choices and use of social and human capital to cope with insecurity? To what extent have these practices mitigated or reproduced insecurity and contributed to or undermined resilience? How has insecurity affected household strategies and welfare outcomes? Pain observes: “Given the evidence of declining land holdings across generations, climatic risk and the fact that most households secure over 50% of their grain supplies from sources other than their own farms, agriculture will—at best—play a part-time subsistence role. The key issue for the rural economy in the short term is employment, which agriculture cannot provide it at a necessary scale. The danger is that marginal increases in productivity will keep people on the land but keep them poor, thus creating an agricultural poverty trap” (53). Policymakers and researchers are urged to realize this.

This literature review shows that not enough is known of the extent to which different men and women are able to access different livelihood opportunities, or the extent to which programs may have an impact on women and men differently. The room for choice or autonomy when acute risk and uncertainty characterize several areas of the country is limited.

Assumptions that high growth rates are the answer to poverty and that there is just one pathway to poverty reduction—economic growth generated through liberal economic policies—need to be questioned. The evidence shows that there are multiple routes to poverty reduction, with the poor defined as the lowest quintile in terms of income. There are examples of countries that achieved significantly higher-than-average pro-poor poverty reduction through a variety of means that did not include growth as the prime ingredient. Rather, they included progressive redistribution policies ... This was achieved through a variety of measures (including poverty alleviation, spending on social sectors, rural education and support for microenterprises) that provided non-agricultural jobs and improved education for the poor. A key part of this, also found in other positive examples, was an expanded agricultural sector that contributed to poverty reduction but did not substantially promote economic growth in the short term. (Pain and Shah 2009, 49)

The specific challenges posed by market-led development to gender equitable growth have, so far, not been explicitly addressed. Markets are currently rooted in power relations that favor the mutual interests of big business, military power holders, and illicit players. Women, whose labor is crucial in the production and processing of a number of commodities for export, such as carpets, dried fruits and nuts, and opium poppy, occupy the lowest rung of these commodity chains, working as unskilled, unpaid or low-paid labor. The low skill composition of and low demand for female labor locks women into a limited range of income-generating activities, mainly agriculture and

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14 There are, however, a few minor exceptions emerging sporadically, as is the case with a qualitative study conducted to evaluate women’s status and local governance. The authors observed that, “During the baseline survey, the respondents were asked to indicate what type of development project should be implemented first in their village, if the community were to be given a grant.” The findings revealed clear preferences that differed between women and men: “Women were much more likely than men to support projects that would provide drinking water and less likely to support irrigation projects and transportation-related construction projects such as roads and bridges, which is consistent with male preferences as they have more control over land and are more mobile” (Beath et al. 2013, 548).
handicrafts production. Any change in these unfavorable parameters would require massive investment in human capital and the creation of enterprises that increase demand for skilled and semi-skilled female labor, an unlikely short-term development given the current security and political environment (Kandiyoti 2007, 192).

The literature advocates for the government of Afghanistan, development agencies, donors, and NGOs to recognize the importance of non-farm labor in rural livelihoods. Rather than encouraging dependence on one sector, such as agriculture, these stakeholders should support the multiple income strategies that poor households have been shown to use as livelihoods sources. Stakeholders also need to begin to view migration in a more positive light, rather than something negative that should be prevented, and undertake research on labor migration to provide a better understanding of this phenomenon. The structural causes of gender inequity have to be tackled by looking beyond traditional activities such as poultry farming and embroidery. A more nuanced picture of rural livelihoods could be achieved by: (a) distinguishing between the asset portfolios of different rural households and individuals in order to understand who will benefit from agriculture programs and who will not; and (b) mapping the different natural resource bases that households have access to before designing agricultural programs (Grace and Pain 2004, 48).

Decades of conflict in Afghanistan and the resulting population displacement has disrupted family life and further increased the burden of women. There is, at present, a pronounced lag between the legal and governance reforms that support the civic and political participation of women and the adverse security and socio-economic conditions that act to aggravate female vulnerability. Implementing development projects that target women is particularly challenging in a country such as Afghanistan that struggles with major deficiencies in security and infrastructure. Furthermore, the marginalization of women limits the quality, rate, and focus of development. Often, the need to focus on these fundamental issues detracts from the capacity of individuals, communities, and organizations to invest in the future. However, many projects have framed these challenges as opportunities to enable creative and sustainable solutions. One virtuous example is represented by a food security and agricultural development project that focuses on implementing kitchen gardening and farmer field schools in Kabul (Wilcox et al. 2014). There is great potential to engage women in income-generating activities; animal husbandry, dairy products, and handicrafts—areas in which women have traditionally been involved—should receive special attention and funding (Povey 2004, 184).

The ongoing conflict situation influences the livelihoods, vulnerability, and coping strategies of Afghan families. In research conducted in the Charikar area, participants indicated that, especially during the Taliban period, their families adopted flexible gender roles as a coping strategy, with women assuming responsibility for more and/or different agricultural tasks than usual. Many also took on other, traditionally male, roles such as doing the shopping and taking care of agricultural business in the markets. Also, when households experience financial crisis, they often relax the traditional roles out of necessity. Families which embrace this shift toward changing roles are less vulnerable and experience more stable livelihoods (Gilmour 2007, 78–83).

The landscapes of Afghanistan are fractured and fragmented, made up of many diverse groups

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15 The evidence is clear that most rural households are grain deficient and depend on market access for food security. Many such households are functionally landless, and income increasingly comes from off-farm and non-farm sources (Pain and Shah 2009, 48).

16 Land without water and livestock without pasture do not make for productive assets. While livestock may be an option for non-landowning women and men who live in areas with sufficient common pasture land, it may not be an option for those who live in areas with insufficient pasture land. Thus, differentiated programming for different households is required at the local level.
differentiated along class, ethnic, and religious lines. In this context, dominated by “broken dreams generated by the broken economy” (Eggerman and Panter-Brick 2010, 81), events such as conflict and drought have resulted in many changes that have affected livelihoods, including increased mobility of women within villages, livelihood diversification out of necessity, diminished assets, and decreased agricultural activity. Afghan society is recovering from war; the majority of the population lack basic services and minimal education; bereavement and destruction have characterized Afghans’ recent lives. The opportunities are limited, especially for the poor, and the imperative for income diversification is acute. Most references reviewed here converge on drawing attention to the diversity of livelihood strategies at inter- and intrahousehold levels as a meaningful entry point into the processes of reconstruction, change, and resilience, and raises questions about assumptions linking agricultural growth, poverty reduction, and promotion of gender equality. Much more information is required to understand the value of diversification undertaken as a coping strategy for risk and is therefore, in a sense, forced diversification, and diversification used as a strategy for accumulating income and assets. It is possible for diversification, flexibility, and multitasking to turn profitable in this highly complex politicized setting. It is crucial, therefore, that strategies be explored with a view to supporting household livelihood diversification, rather than trying to move households to agriculture entirely.

4. Annexes


17 More than three decades of war and political instability have rendered Afghanistan fundamentally vulnerable to food insecurity. Due to the protracted nature of the conflicts, the population developed coping strategies to mitigate these threats, including migration and employment diversification, and either submission to political oppression or the taking up arms, for example. While the problems of survival were enormous for many people, most individuals, households, and communities somehow lived through the many years of war (Lautze et al. 2002). A further example of how people employ and shape “security strategies” to deal with threats, conflicts, and livelihood insecurities is provided in Schütte (2013).

18 For a deeper theoretical understanding about the value of pluralism and complementarity in the Pamir Mountains, with concrete evidence of the practice of diversification with respect to adaptation and resilience, see discussion of Kassam (2009; 2010) in the annotated bibliography.


