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**‘The People Follow the Mullah,  
and the Mullah Follows the People’:  
Politics of Aid and Gender in  
Afghanistan post-2001**

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## ABSTRACT<sup>1</sup>

This article is based on two months of fieldwork conducted in Kabul, Afghanistan in 2010. It 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. As gender and ending violence against women are "sensitive" topics in the country, donors increasingly adopt an Islamic framework when engaging with men and local communities. While Afghan women's organizations have always engaged with a broad spectrum of stakeholders, amongst whom are the religious clerics and scholars, I argue that a donor-driven approach that treats Islam as the only entry-point not only simplifies the complexities of Islam, but it also creates a distinction between "religious" vs. "secular" dichotomy which makes the work of local women's organisations and activists even more challenging as their engagement strategies are narrowed.

**KEYWORDS:** Afghanistan; faith-based approach; men and development; women's rights

## RESUMEN

Este artículo se basa en dos meses de trabajo de campo llevado a cabo en Kabul, Afganistán en 2010. Se trata de una reflexión feminista sobre la política de ayuda, del género y de la religión en el contexto de los esfuerzos de las organizaciones de sociedad civil para hacer frente a la violencia contra las mujeres en Afganistán. En cuanto al género y la eliminación de violencia contra las mujeres son temas "sensibles" en el país, los donantes adoptan cada vez más un marco Islamista al tratar con los hombres y las comunidades locales. Mientras las organizaciones de mujeres afganas siempre han comprometido con un amplio espectro de partes interesadas, entre los cuales están clérigos religiosos y académicos, yo sostengo que un enfoque impulsado por los donantes que trata el Islam como el único punto de entrada no sólo simplifica las complejidades del Islam, pero también crea una distinción entre el "religioso" frente "secular" dicotomía que hace que el trabajo de las organizaciones locales de mujeres y activistas aun más difícil como sus estrategias de participación se estrechan.

**PALABRAS CLAVES:** Afganistán; el enfoque religioso; los hombres y desarrollo; los derechos de las mujeres

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## Introduction

We face the challenge of how to frame the discourse of gender and women's human rights within the Afghan context...without undermining our relationship with women's organisations or the local communities (A27 Interview 2010).

In Afghanistan, civil society organisations, whether they be the Afghan government, international donor agencies, or local community-based organisations, are very much caught up in the 'critical conjuncture...of religion, politics and women's equality' (Tadros 2011, 1). Over the past few years, there has been a strong rallying of identity politics through political Islam,<sup>1</sup> and the international donor community, in part influenced by local stakeholders, have increasingly come to rely on religion as a shortcut to achieving development goals and social justice. The impact of this policy decision can be seen in the way that some gender projects have been 'religion-sensitised,' which has brought both short-term gains and long-term issues. The favoured approach to engage men and the conservative sector of Afghan societies is to reconstruct Afghan masculinity through Islam. Afghanistan has been a focus of international donors since the events of 11 September 2001, with the total aid reported to the Development Co-Operation Directorate (DCD DAC) from all donors amounting to US\$29 billion between 2001 and 2010 (Poole 2010). The combination of aid delivery and military occupation – where historically the latter has been bitterly resisted – has produced a complex power relationship between donors, partners, and aid recipients. Since many of the donors and implementing agencies are the same nationalities of the Coalition force, local communities perceive them as carrying both aid and security agendas. On the other hand, many local staff in civil society organisations (especially those based in Kabul) come from middle-class families in urban settings, or are expatriates who have returned from overseas (such as Iran or Pakistan). Thus, there is also tension amongst the Afghans between the locals and the 'newcomers' who have better qualifications and more experience (A1 Interview 2011; A6 Interview 2010). In order to navigate through this difficult terrain of power differentials and identity politics, Islam is often seen as a rallying point to unite beyond disagreements, especially when it comes to sensitive topics such as women's rights and gender equality (A29 Interview 2010; A6 Interview 2010).

The intersection of gender, politics and religion has been of strong interest to feminists, particularly regarding how women fare from the experience—whether that may be attempts to gender sensitise religious frameworks, or to challenge the limitations of reforms (Helie-Lucas 1993; Mir-Hosseini and Hamzic 2010; Moghissi 2008). The aim of this article is to provide a case study from Afghanistan on how gender, aid, and Islam interact within a context of occupation, war, and conflict. The military occupation has provided the opportunities for a greater number of aid agencies to operate in Afghanistan. At the same time, implementing gender projects has become increasingly sensitive, as communities suspect that aid agencies working on gender issues are part of a western attempt to undermine local cultures and practices. This article is based on materials from 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

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<sup>1</sup> In using the term 'political Islam' I want to make a distinction between religion as faith and religion as politics. Whilst this may be an artificial construct that overlooks the blurring between faith and politics, I do want to stress that this article is a critique of how religion is instrumentalized for political gains, which also extends to the use of religion by individuals to achieve power and privilege at the expense of others.

consultants, and bilateral and multilateral agencies, with the key source of information coming from local and international NGOs. Due to security concerns, research in rural areas was not able to be conducted. Names of the research participants have been coded with some identifying details changed to protect their privacy.

## **Religion, Human Rights, and the Aid Angle**

While feminists such as Sally Engle Merry (2006) have argued for the adaptation of human rights into local terms and contexts, including the use of social practices and traditions such as religion, others such as Deniz Kandiyoti and Hania Sholkamy have pointed out the risks of using religion to promote rights and equality in theocratic states, which can make religion ‘the arbitrator of politics and social change’ (Sholkamy 2011, 48). Analysis from fieldwork findings suggests that there is consensus amongst informants that Islam and women’s rights are not inimical to one another, and that there is an opportunity for both academics and civil society organisations to review advocacy strategies around gender and women’s rights so that messages can reach a broader spectrum of aid recipients. However, there is an inadvertent reinforcement of ‘benevolent patriarchy’ when advocating for male behavioural changes. For instance, a majority of civil society organisations, including international NGOs and community-based organisations, found community resistance to discussions of domestic violence. A popular strategy used by NGOs to counter this issue is to utilize social norm marketing<sup>2</sup> to deliver messages about men’s roles in the family within a construct of Islamic masculinity. While it is not within the scope of this paper to provide a theological and feminist consideration on Islam, gender, and social justice, I wish to highlight an emerging trend that Hania Sholkamy (2010) and other feminists have identified as the ‘instrumentalization of Islam’.<sup>3</sup> This involves the simplistic re-packaging of religion by international aid agencies and academics, who ‘think they have found the key to hearts and minds in the region, and that this key is ensconced in a religious box’ (Sholkamy 2010). This approach has also been adopted by some aid agencies in Afghanistan toward the issue of gender equality and violence against women and, in the case of engaging with men, the preference is to reform male identities and practices through the authority of the Qur’an. While support of the religious sector in a country with a 99 percent Muslim majority may be seen as strategic and practical, I will argue 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) is not only false (Kandiyoti 2011), as the feminist space prioritises plurality of discourse, but also promotes the ‘notion that choices have to be religiously recommended and sanctioned’ (Sholkamy 2011, 50).

Furthermore, the ‘instrumentalization of Islam’ as a quick-fix solution to reduce gender discrimination and violence not only weakens the legitimacy of activists who seek a pluralistic space, but it also assumes that Islam is a homogenous religion with no tensions between the different schools and branches. Within US military campaigns, as well as U.S.

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<sup>2</sup> The term ‘social norms marketing’ refers to ‘traditional marketing techniques, including mass media and face to face campaigns that are designed to alter individuals’ perceptions about which attitudes and behaviors are typical or desirable in their community’ (Paluck et al 2010, 1).

<sup>3</sup> There is a significant body of feminist analyses on religion, gender, and women’s rights. One of the most recent and lively discussions can be found in the IDS Bulletin’s issue titled *Religion, Rights and Gender at the Crossroads*, vol. 42, no. 1.

government-funded research institutes such as Brookings,<sup>4</sup> there is a tendency to politicise Islam as part of the ‘winning hearts and minds’ strategy (Blaydes 2009; Crockatt 2005). Civil society organisations that wish to distance themselves from the military campaign should avoid aligning their advocacy materials with such rhetoric in order to prevent misunderstandings from local communities. Additionally, the use of Islam is not purely a donor-driven agenda, as interviews from local Afghans who work in the NGO sector indicate that the push to instrumentalize Islam comes from both external and local pressures (A30 Interview 2010; A25b Interview, 2010).

This article will reflect on ‘the politics of gender, namely processes of appropriation, contestation and reinterpretation of positions on gender relations and women’s rights by state, non-state and global actors’ (Kandiyoti 2011, 13), and how it is played out in the context of ‘reconstructing’ Afghan men through Islam. In conclusion, I propose that whilst a religious framework is important in opening dialogue and acceptance about gender equality in Afghan communities, donor civil society organisations should also build the capacity of their staff and project implementing partners, co-ordinate better among implementing partners on existing projects, and focus on male behavioural change through a better understanding of masculinities and gender relations in local contexts.

## **Women’s Rights in Afghanistan**

The liberation of women was one of the many rationales used to justify the US-led military invasion of Afghanistan. Before and during the military campaign, western media was saturated with images of Afghan women in blue *burqas* (including a revival of interest on Sharbat Gula, the ‘Afghan Girl’ who appeared on the front cover of the National Geographic in 1985), and video footage of women being flogged or stoned by the Taliban. Political leaders such as George W. Bush and Tony Blair (supported by their wives) co-opted feminist rhetoric, endorsed by celebrity figures and certain advocacy groups.<sup>5</sup> However, despite this front of female liberation, the status and situation of Afghan women and girls remain relatively unchanged and, in some instances, have worsened. According to Womankind Worldwide (2008), a UK NGO, 80 percent of Afghan women are affected by domestic violence, over 60 percent of marriages are forced, and half of all girls are married before the age of 16. The high prevalence of violence against women is echoed in the UNIFEM 2008 Violence Against Women Primary Database Report, which states, ‘women and girls are mostly abused by people close to them; i.e. family members, partners, step family members, in-laws and other relatives’ (UNIFEM 2008, 35). According to the UNIFEM report, this group amounts to 92 percent of the reported cases of abuse’, and frequently ‘when the women or girls seek recourse from the government they are further molested by the government representatives’ (UNIFEM 2008, 35).

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<sup>4</sup> The Brookings Institute is a nonprofit public policy organization based in Washington DC. Its largest funding contributors include the US Government, Ford Foundation, ExxonMobil, and the Bank of America.

<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that there were no campaigns led by women’s NGOs prior to September 2001 that highlighted the Taliban’s oppression of women, or of the mujahid, or of the Soviet Union’s human rights violations. Indeed, within Afghanistan there has been a lively history of women’s activism, such as the All Afghan Women’s Union (AAWU), which has been operating since the Taliban regime and provides education training for women and girls.

The illiteracy rate is high in the Afghan police force, which makes accurate and detailed reporting and documentation difficult.<sup>6</sup> Even if a domestic violence report is successfully lodged with the police, there is the question of where the victim can go if her family home is unsafe. There are a few women's shelters in larger cities such as Kabul and Herat, but they are almost unheard of in rural areas (A3 Interview 2010; A4 Interview 2010; Nojumi et al 2009, 95-96). The few that do exist are not immune to political interference. Afghanistan has approximately 11 independent shelters funded by international donors and managed by local women's NGOs. In February 2011, the Afghan government proposed that the shelters be administrated by the government and include a review panel to assess women's 'eligibility.' Due to the international community's response, the Afghan government backed down from the original proposal, instead calling for greater regulation and monitoring of the quality of the shelters (AFP 2011). It was speculated in an email press release by the Afghan Women's Network (email 17 February 2011) that the original plan to take over the women's shelters was, in part, due to the government bowing to pressures from tribes and clans who were unhappy that the government was giving refuge to abused women with foreign assistance.

According to Kandiyoti (2007), the Afghan history of various attempts at modernization in the twentieth century, including reforms to promote the status and greater participation of women, have generally originated from urban-based, westernised elites. These efforts to consolidate power from a peripheral location in a country with diverse ethnic groups often result in conflicts between 'modernisers and traditionalists and between women's emancipation and patriarchy' (Moghadam 1993, 248). Due to the politicisation of the status of women in Afghanistan, the state is often paralysed in its policy towards women and gender, else it deliberately denies women's rights for the sake of political convenience. Examples of the latter include the attempted regulation of women's shelters in 2011, and President Harmid Karzai's signing of the Shia Personal Status Law in 2009, which imposed greater restrictions upon women's legal rights around marital abuse, child marriage, and polygamy (Oates 2009). While the Law is now undergoing a reform process to make it more equitable for women, there is no guarantee on whether the reforms will be actively adopted and enforced, as NGO working groups have reported strong resistance from parliamentarians (A5a Interview 2010). Afghan women now face a precarious situation where neither the government nor informal support networks (such as family) are supportive of their rights—a situation not dissimilar to the Taliban regime prior to the US-led military campaign.

### **Elimination of Violence against Women: Too sensitive and too western**

In Afghanistan, everything that is about women is too sensitive (A27 Interview 2010).

Despite the international media coverage of gender-based violence in Afghanistan, at the daily level both local and international civil society organisations have found it difficult to

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<sup>6</sup> Gender-sensitive victim response from the police is also lacking, according to Halima, a 35 year old woman who escaped after her husband sold her to three men to cover gambling debt: 'If we women had any confidence in the ability of the government to protect us I would have not come to this women's shelter but would have gone to them in the first place. Instead, I was made to sit in a police station for half an hour and was accused of every possible crime by the police after I escaped home' (from the press release of the Afghan Women's Network on 17 February 2011).

talk about the issue due to a number of factors. At the community level, one of the key challenges for civil society organisations is the denial from the community that sexual and gender-based violence exists and/or that it is a western agenda. As one gender program officer from a national NGO explained,

[i]t's not easy to talk about violence [against women] because people say there is no wife beating in Afghanistan. If you go to the community and talk about it then they get angry because [they say] it doesn't exist or you have a western agenda (A23 Interview 2010).

I witnessed this type of response during a one-day workshop in Kabul organised by an Afghan women's NGO. The purpose of the workshop was to inform community members, *shuras* (community leaders), *mullahs*, and the civil society sector on the progress of the Family Law Reform. The initiative was led by various NGOs and the more liberal<sup>7</sup> religious scholars to provide more protection for women and children, especially on issues around inheritance, early marriage, domestic violence, and polygamy.<sup>8</sup> The workshop included a female human rights lawyer who gave a presentation. After her speech, a heated debate ensued as the audience (the majority of whom were men) argued about the loss of Afghan culture and stated that the Family Law Reform process is a western feminist agenda aimed at breaking up Afghan families. At the conference conclusion, I asked an Afghan woman who sat next to me whether such debates were common. She replied: 'This happens every time when we try to talk about women's issues. It is their way to stop the discussion' (A21 Interview 2010).<sup>9</sup>

One explanation for the strong opposition from the males in the audience is the way that custom and tradition have defined gender roles and values. In their nationwide research on livelihood and security for rural Afghans, Nojumi et al (2009, 93) concludes that: '[f]emale chastity and female behaviour are some of the primary sources of family's honour or potential disgrace.' At the centre of the honor code lies the socially defined notion of masculinity, where Afghan men 'see women as the repository of their honor' (Rubin 2002, 24). The definition of a 'breach' by women of this assigned role has expanded over time from adultery to attempts to exercise self-autonomy, such as the right to choose marriage partners or divorce an abusive husband. Coming from this perspective, attempts to reform the Family Law so that women have greater protection and rights in areas such as inheritance, marriage and divorce, as well as domestic violence, may be seen as a threat to undermine a masculine hegemony that functions through the control of women.

Moreover, staff within civil society organisations internalise the attitude that violence against women is too 'sensitive' to work on in Afghan communities. This can be illustrated by the experience of an international NGO that has operated in Afghanistan for a number of years in humanitarian and agricultural support. Although the organisation has no direct programs or projects that address gender-based violence, it operates a series of women's empowerment projects that focus on income-generation activities, capacity-building and empowerment. In early 2010, female beneficiaries requested NGO staff to address domestic violence and

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<sup>7</sup> 'Liberal' is the term used by Afghan NGO workers and religious scholars when describing an understanding of Islam and gender issues that seek to promote equality and protection of women's human rights.

<sup>8</sup> See Rights and Democracy Afghanistan, which has an English version of the proposed changes: [http://www.dd-rd.af/?page\\_id=412](http://www.dd-rd.af/?page_id=412).

<sup>9</sup> This experience is shared by other women's NGOs in Afghanistan. See Counterpart International's report, *Outreach Guide to Afghan Women*, for in-depth discussions on the issue: <http://www.afghangendercafe.org/Uploads/2.6.08.FINAL.pdf>.

engage with local men to support anti-domestic violence initiatives. However, the organisation became caught in an internal debate on how to follow up the community's request, as staff were divided over a course of action. Some staff expressed reluctance, arguing that any projects that focus on gender-based violence would potentially have a negative impact on other program areas. Another cause for reluctance was due to previous experiences where small gender-sensitive initiatives such as hygiene kits (which contain soap, a sewing kit, and other basic cleaning items) were rejected by the community, who saw them as too 'western.' Therefore, despite the local women's requests for help to stop domestic violence in the community, the organisation was divided over what should be done. As the interview participant (A27 Interview 2010) from the organisation explained, 'the rationale from the staff was, if such a minor issue already presented an obstacle, what would happen if something about [domestic] violence is done?'

It would be easy to criticize the NGO for not meeting a request for help from women in the community with which they work. However, both international and local NGOs, particularly female local staff, face enormous security challenges in occupied Afghanistan. In a 2009 report, the UN Assistance Missions to Afghanistan documented the increasing attacks against women in the public sphere, noting that female activists who work on human rights or women's rights are often labelled as being 'involved in an anti-Islamic conspiracy' and are attacked, sometimes by their own community (UNAMA 2009, 12). Another example is from a women's NGO that provides support to women experiencing domestic violence. The NGO explained that as part of client support, the organisation used to conduct follow-up visits to the woman's house; however, a female staff member was recently physically attacked by local criminals as 'punishment' for her work. Subsequently, the NGO ceased its follow-up visits to clients (A4b Interview 2010). Security risks are of particular concern for local NGOs that do not have the same resources or budgets for security measures as international NGOs. At the same time, Afghan employees in international NGOs agencies face greater risks than their expatriate counterparts, as many Afghans work in rural areas or for outreach (that is, face-to-face meetings with individuals and groups to assess needs and issues). In fact, female activists regularly change mobile phone numbers to avoid being tracked, or they would 'disappear' for days or weeks, taking refuge in either their own home or that of a relative or friend, until it was safe to re-appear in public (A3a Interview 2010). With the impending withdrawal of the U.S. and other foreign military presences over the next few years, as well as the attempt to establish amnesty for and reintegration of the anti-government forces, there is grave concern that the rights and safety of Afghan women will continue to deteriorate (Human Rights Watch 2010).

The examples given above provide a snapshot of the challenges (both external factors and internalised attitudes and norms) of working on gender-based violence in Afghanistan. This is not to say these experiences are shared by every civil society organisation, but rather, when asked about the challenges of working with local communities on violence against women in terms of intervention and prevention, informants from civil society organisations invariably cite issues of cultural sensitivity, fear of westernisation, and security as the key barriers to their daily work, which they believe undermine their legitimacy to engage with Afghan communities.

## **‘They Come through the Door and Leave by the Window’: Power politics of the aid partnership**

While there are many good practice examples of gender projects and partnerships, the relationship between donor and partner NGOs is a fraught one due to the power differentials between the developed and developing countries’ agencies. In the Afghanistan context, this is further intensified by the large number of foreign donors who have competing interests and priorities that may not be aligned with local needs. As one manager (A25b Interview 2010) from a women’s organization explained, ‘[s]ometimes we take on projects which are not our focus...because I have to pay the staff, and because the projects are decided by [the donors].’<sup>10</sup> Other challenges include a lack of consultation with local partner organizations, poor coordination amongst international agencies, and the absence of a unified strategy on achieving gender equality (A3 Interview 2010; Kandiyoti 2009).

When the Taliban regime was overthrown, there was great hope amongst Afghan women, as one professional Afghan woman recounted:

In the early 2000... yes, there was great optimism. Remember, we had to give up our jobs and education... when the Taliban was here. So when [the international community] came... we thought women would quickly gain our rights and freedom. But there was no coordination between donors and international, and the optimism gave way (A21 Interview 2010).

A local women’s NGO (A6a Interview 2010) related that after being supported for more than five years in operating a community centre, the donor informed them in 2009 that funding would cease as the donor agency’s priorities had shifted. There was no phasing strategy to ease the NGO’s financial burden in the process of searching for another donor, so the NGO now runs the community centre from its core funding. For another women’s NGO, the challenge was to find long-term funding for a male-behavioural change project that had been funded on a ‘pilot’ basis for the previous three years, despite the project having received much praise from the donors (A7 Interview, 2010). But the main issue for local organisations who are ‘partners’ with donor agencies is the short timeframe given for project activities, making it difficult for local organisations to implement activities that involve awareness-raising and behavioural change. These both require a significant investment of time with local communities so that trust and rapport can be established. As one NGO explained:

They [international donors] want us to do gender training in three days. Do they think it’s a game, that we just get some men and women together and give them tea? To change people, you need time. Donors don’t treat us seriously (A5b Interview 2010).

The informant’s frustration is supported by feminists critical of the gender and development field, where they see more radical concepts and processes co-opted by the mainstream so that ideas such as ‘empowerment’ are reduced from ‘a complex process of self-realization, self-actualization and mobilization to demand change’ to a simple act of knowledge or resource transfer (Cornwall et al. 2007, 7).

It may be easy to attribute the entire blame to donor agencies; however, they also face pressure from governments back home to implement or prioritize a certain agenda that does

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<sup>10</sup> For instance, an NGO that specializes in education and vocational training may take on water sanitation projects (either subcontracting to another organization or hiring additional staff).

not take account of the local context or circumstances. This can best be illustrated from a conversation with a gender advisor from a bilateral agency:

This is a common story... donors going ahead with their gender projects. Look, we have certainly learned from our mistakes—I remember one case [a donor government] wanted to do some workshop on women's empowerment in the [name of province]—that was when there's a severe food shortage in the area! But sometimes there are political pressures from your own government (A10b Interview 2010).

Nevertheless, taken as a whole, these experiences with donors have made many Afghan NGOs wary of the international community, which was succinctly summed up by one activist (A7 Interview 2010): 'In Kabul we have a phrase for the international community: 'they come through the door and leave by the window'. Within this context of tension and distrust between local NGOs and the international community, I will explore how both donors and civil society organisations attempt to overcome these barriers in an environment of global contestation over 'how to do gender' in occupied Afghanistan.

### **Contestations of 'How to do Gender' in Afghanistan**

The instrumentalization of Islam, and its impact on aid projects in Afghanistan, must be seen within the context of widespread dissatisfaction with the Coalition forces' military campaigns after September 2001. For instance, surveys conducted by polling firms and NGOs indicate that respondents, especially in Muslim majority states, have an overwhelmingly negative view of the United States (Blaydes 2009, 2). However, rather than viewing this discontent as a global phenomenon where citizens in western countries such as Australia, New Zealand, and others have also expressed strong sentiments against the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the U.S. media and some academics attribute this as proof of Huntington's 'clash of civilisations' theory. Huntington theorised in the 1990s that post-Cold War conflicts would arise from cultural rifts and tensions (Blaydes 2009; Crockatt 2005, 121-122; Huntington 1993). At the same time, the counter-insurgency of 'winning hearts and minds' was a favoured approach in the Middle East.<sup>11</sup> In Afghanistan, the most well-known example of this approach is the military-led Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT), which was introduced by the U.S. government and has been operating since 2002.

The relationship between NGOs and the Coalition forces in Afghanistan has always been fraught, as the international NGOs regard association with the Coalition as a risk to NGO staff safety. For instance, in a joint briefing paper written by eleven international NGOs, including Action Aid, Oxfam, and Marie Stopes International, it was argued that '[h]umanitarian agencies rely on local acceptance to ensure their security, for which their perceived identity as independent and impartial is critical' (Waldman 2009, 17). Furthermore, the paper criticised the PRT for its diversion of bilateral funding from the Afghan civilian development process, and the creation of geographical disparities in aid distribution due to the PRT's selection of project areas (based on counter-insurgency rather than a unified, country-wide development approach). It concludes:

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<sup>11</sup> The strategy of 'winning hearts and minds' was first used during the Malayan Emergency, when British troops would give local Malaysians and indigenous tribes food and aid. It was also used during the Vietnam War to win both local and American support for the military campaign (Nagl 2008; Stubbs 2008).

PRTs' hearts and minds approach to assistance, drawn from counter-insurgency doctrine, is not only at odds with accepted principles of development, but, given that it is so often ineffective and unsustainable, it is highly unlikely to achieve its intended security objectives (Waldman 2009, 5).

However, international NGOs seek to maintain 'a clear distinction between the role and function of humanitarian actors from that of the military' (Wagner 2005), including the establishment of a non-binding 'Guidelines for the Interaction of Civilian and Military Actors in Afghanistan' in 2008. Although the international aid agencies maintain a strong policy position to distinguish and distance themselves from military-led aid programs, the distinction is harder to define when both aid agencies and the military forces attempt to localise their projects within what they perceive as an entry point to Afghanistan's cultural and social framework. Examples of these include the use of Muslim troops from the UAE to deliver aid in rural communities (BBC 2008), incorporation of NGO women's programs such as the Asia Foundation's 'Women's Rights within an Islamic Framework', and other case studies to be discussed below. This is not to suggest that there is a direct policy consensus to instrumentalize Islam between the Coalition military and the international NGOs, but is intended as a reflection on the contradictions when international aid communities distance themselves from military operations, yet at the same time adopt similar strategies for program advocacy and implementation.

Kandiyoti (2009) has observed that Afghanistan has been the 'target of a sustained, if ill-coordinated, campaign to institutionalize mechanisms and benchmarks for gender equality'. Similarly, a comparison can be made with the way that the international community has sought to use religion as an entry point to work with local communities on domestic violence and gender issues. In an Islamic republic where the population is 99 percent Muslim (of which approximately 80 percent are Sunni and 19 percent Shi'a), it makes sense that any gender programs would take religion into consideration, whether it be identifying the various religious actors and groups during stakeholder mapping or engaging with religious scholars and leaders in dialogues to promote equality and protection of women's rights. A good practice example of this is a project implemented by the Educational Training Center for Poor Women and Girls of Afghanistan (ECW), designed to build the capacity of local *shura* (community) leaders in conflict resolution. To ensure that the project had local acceptance and ownership, ECW consulted with local *shuras* on which areas of expertise they wished to be trained in. The *shuras* identified conflict resolution, particularly in relation to domestic violence, as an area where they lacked language and skills (A25 Interview 2010). During the training manual design process, ECW engaged with both the *shuras* and religious scholars on how to incorporate Islam and gender considerations into the document. The project was widely cited by various Afghan and international NGOs as an example of good practice in how a project aimed at reducing violence against women is both culturally and gender-sensitive. This confirms Merry's (2006, 10) argument that cultures are 'far more fluid and open to change than the essentialized model suggests' if genuine engagement with local communities is practiced.

Another example of good practice where the process involved a wide range of stakeholders was the USAID-funded 'Rule of Law' project.<sup>12</sup> One of the project's aims was to facilitate dialogue between conservative and progressive Islamic scholars, and identify rules and principles used in the informal justice sector that were inconsistent with a gender-sensitive

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<sup>12</sup> To avoid sensitivity, the USAID logo and the association were not shown or mentioned in the project.

interpretation of the Qur'an (A2 Interview 2010).<sup>13</sup> As part of this process, the project established a 45-people consultation group consisting of academics, judges, Sharia Law experts, Afghan women activists and mullahs. This was followed by meetings between both progressive and conservative Islamic scholars. The purposes of these meetings were to focus on building the relationship between conservative scholars and other interest groups that had a different interpretation of the Qur'an, and to apply a feminist approach (A2 Interview 2010). One of the promising indicators of success was that while previously conservative mullahs would leave the room when a female Islamic scholar presented a talk, after several meetings they accepted women's ability and right to discuss religious matters (A2 Interview 2010).

However, there are concerns that development agencies regard Islam as an easy choice. For instance, Palwasha Hassan (A29 interview 2010), former Country Director of Rights and Democracy Afghanistan, pointed out that whilst engaging with the local communities through Islam and building a dialogue between progressive and conservative Islamic scholars are important, these strategies must take into consideration the causes and complexities of women's issues in Afghanistan. For instance, the national average literacy rate stands at 28.1 per cent, with women at 12.6 per cent compared to men at 43.1 per cent (CIA 2011). This means people's understanding of the Qur'an and other religious texts such as the Hadith<sup>14</sup> is limited, and learning is mainly through rote memorization. Further, there is no regulation of the training and assessment of mullahs in Afghanistan. In an interview with the Academy of Scientific Research (a government institution that produces advocacy and information materials on Islam), informants identified the need for greater regulation in the training, assessment, and qualifications of mullahs, none of which is being carried out by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Hajj (which the Academy is not part of) due to its limited capacity (Focus Group Meeting 2010).<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, some institutes have argued for the potential of recruiting mullahs, due to their influence in the local community, as part of the counter-insurgency campaign. An example is the commentary on *Huffington Post* from Christine Coleman, a senior fellow of the Brookings Institute, and Musada Sultan, an adviser to the Afghan government:

There are approximately 150,000 mosques across Afghanistan, but less than three percent of them are even registered with the government, primarily because of a lack of funding and reach... Putting mullahs on the government's payroll will not change loyalties overnight. But as part of a counterinsurgency 'clear, hold and build' strategy, paying mullahs a steady salary of up to \$200 per month (roughly what the Taliban pays its fighters) in villages that have been 'cleared' can be a cost-effective way to help 'hold'...[and] could ultimately reduce the need for very expensive military operations, saving lives as well as money (Coleman and Sultan 2009).

However, given the complexities of the Afghan conflict, as well as the diversity of Islam, 'putting mullahs on the government's payroll' (Coleman and Sultan 2009) may be a

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<sup>13</sup> 'Correct' in this sense means the interpretations are also consistent with current Afghan legislation.

<sup>14</sup> The Hadith is the words and actions of the prophet Muhammad. Just as there are two key denominations of Islam, Shi'ism and Sunnism, there are also different sets and interpretations of the Hadith.

<sup>15</sup> While the Academy of Scientific Research identifies itself as 'liberal' (because it is comprised of religious scholars who promote a contemporary interpretation of the Qur'an, including the support for women's legal rights in marriage, divorce, and inheritance), the Academy director did not extend this allowance towards sexuality, and condemned marriages between 'two men or two women' to be 'the product of human rights activists and influence from the west' (Focus Group Meeting 2010).

somewhat simplistic solution to achieving gender equality or fighting the Taliban. While there is scope for the Afghan government to provide training and regulation of *mullahs*, to compete with the Taliban by paying clerics in return for their support is not only a shallow interpretation of Islam, it can also put them at risk of local jihadist groups. Additionally, what religious leaders can or cannot do within their community is limited by local contexts. While it is undeniable that Islam has a significant role in defining the cultural, political, and legal landscape of the country, tribal factions, customary systems of justice, a change of hierarchy in villages from a feudal landlord system to a division between the rich (jihadist groups and powerful warlords) and the poor, also shape contemporary gender norms and practices, especially in rural areas (Nojumi et al 2009, 259). As one NGO staff member wryly observed, ‘The people follow the mullah, and the mullah follows the people’ (A4a Interview 2010). In other words, how religion is interpreted, implemented and practised is contingent upon cultural and political paradigms (Anwar 2006; Moghissi 1996). 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. As Ayub et al. (2009, 12) maintains:

[L]ess comfortable for observers to acknowledge, perhaps, is that the Taliban’s vision for social order was not entirely alien to large segments of Afghan society. Many of the government’s laws, particularly with respect to women, were an extension of the complex tribal codes and social customs already in effect in the Pashtun south.

It should be noted that Ayub’s argument is not meant to represent culture as an obstacle to human and women’s rights in Afghanistan, but is an indirect critique of President Hamid Karzai, who is an ethnic Pashtun from southern Afghanistan. Karzai’s policies on women—from the Shiite Personal Status Law in 2009 that restricts women’s marital rights to the recent proposal to regulate women’s shelters—often do not respect the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), to which Afghanistan is a signatory party.

### **The ‘Happy Family and Healthy Community’ Project**

The ‘Happy Family and Healthy Community’ project is a joint initiative between UNFPA (United Nations Population Fund), GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit), the Ministry of Women’s Affairs (MOWA), and the Ministry of Religious Affairs and the Hajj. It has been operating in 16 districts near Kabul since 2007 and is now in its second phase. The project is implemented by government agencies, with UNFPA and other partners (including the Supreme Court and donors) providing funding and technical support. Its purpose is to raise community awareness of and support for women’s rights and access to health care through the training of mullahs, Shura scholars and other religious leaders as community educators. While the project does not directly address violence against women, the religious leaders talk about ‘healthy family relationships...including domestic violence...from an Islamic perspective’ (A27 Interview 2010). In addition, the project aims to use the trained religious leaders to reach out to Afghan men, with the assumption that men will pay greater attention to religious teachings. As Maulawi Amanudin, a Ministry of

Religious Affairs official who also took part in the project, explains: ‘When Afghan people are given instruction based on their religious values, they will listen and accept’ (Ryan 2008). Furthermore, the definition of a ‘healthy marriage’ is defined by a Supreme Court official as follows: ‘Having a healthy mother and a healthy family is what it means to have a healthy marriage in Islam’ (Ryan 2008). The religious leaders’ views are further reinforced through a series of media and knowledge products such as radio spots, public events, posters, and pamphlets.

The rhetoric and approach used by the project’s promotional booklet closely follows the social norm marketing strategy used by many organisations to advocate the elimination of violence against women around the world. In essence, social norm marketing

conveys messages aimed at convincing its audience that certain attitudes and behaviours will be received as ‘normal’ (typical or desirable) by relevant community members. Messages carrying information about social norms (e.g., ‘men in this community believe in treating women with respect!’) can thus be distinguished from marketing aimed at improving individual attitudes (e.g., ‘women are worthy of respect!’) or at changing individual beliefs (e.g., ‘beating a woman does not prove your authority over her!’) (Paluck et al 2010, 2).

In the context of the ‘Happy Family, Healthy Society’ project, the social norm is the presumed Islamic norms and values that communities uphold, and the booklet has many citations (interpreted from a gender-sensitive perspective) from the Qur’an and the Hadith to lend religious authority. For instance, on men’s responsibilities towards their children, the booklet explains: ‘The Prophet (PBUH) says “the one who tries for the comfort of his family is equal to a Mujahid who is doing Jihad.” Mizan Alhekma, Page 20’ (UNFPA et al. date unknown, 5). Jihad in this context is defined as ‘the father who works for the comfort of his family, and will be blessed as a Mujahid who fights for the sake of God’ (UNFPA et al date unknown, 5). From an instrumentalist approach, the booklet also sends out a clear message about men’s roles in supporting the family and their spouse:

Men are also advised to consult with family members regarding family and social matters [...]. Men should use their gentlest and most polite way of speaking in the family. The man should try to make his wife happy, as she is also his best friend. He should not hurt her dignity or honour and must respect her as a person. (UNFPA et al., date unknown 6)

As project evaluation reports were unavailable, it is difficult to assess the effectiveness of the project. However, I would argue that projects such as the ‘Happy Family, Healthy Community’ have good intentions, but in their efforts to instruct the local communities on the ‘role of men in the family in the broader context of Islam and the Hadith’ (UNFPA et al. date unknown, i), opportunities to engage with men in exploring the complexities of gender norms and values are missed. In their attempt to reform and reconstruct men along a pious manhood based on what is seen as a liberal interpretation of Islam, the project inadvertently essentializes people’s understanding and interactions with religious beliefs.

If activists and NGOs wish to take ‘advantage of the potential of local cultural practices for change’ (Merry 2006, 11), a good example is Bedari, a Pakistan women’s NGO that works with rural districts near Islamabad and runs workshops in the local communities on discrimination against female children. One of the awareness-raising exercises Bedari uses is to divide the workshop participants into two groups: in one group, participants write down what people say to a family who just had a baby girl, while the other group writes responses given when a child with a disability was born. The workshop facilitator then asks each group to read out what is written, and they discuss why people’s perceptions about girls and

individuals with disabilities are similar (P2 Interview 2010). Another example is the All Afghan Women's Union, which works with rural districts in the outskirts of Kabul to increase women's income generation opportunities by encouraging husbands and wives to work together in a cash crop project. This project is endorsed by the local *shura* and religious leaders, who donated a small plot of land for the purpose (A1b Interview 2010). These examples demonstrate the ways in which Afghan men can be engaged in projects aimed at social change. Therefore, rather than only giving men instructions on how to be good Muslim husbands and fathers, the joint UNFPA project could also ask men to reflect on the following: what they know of the tasks done by their wife during the day; the difficulties of childbirth without access to medical support; awareness of deaths in childbirths in their own village; or even a self-examination of what it means to be a man in terms of their roles and expectations in life. Similarly, the booklet advises men that their wife is their 'best friend,' but more could have been said on how to achieve this level of trust and intimacy. Whilst I do not advocate for or assume that a revolution in gender relations comes packaged in a book, 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.

### **Potential Impact on Feminist Space and Gender Norms**

One of the key concerns for feminists when confronted with the instrumentalization of religion is the narrowing of scope for strategies and voices that fall outside of the religious paradigm (Kandiyoti 2011; Tadros 2011). By favouring one approach above others, it can also marginalise NGOs and activists who are non-religious based. For instance, during a conversation with a gender adviser who works for a bilateral agency in Kabul, I raised the question of donor support towards women NGOs' safety, citing the case where a female NGO outreach worker was abducted and assaulted. The response from the gender adviser was: 'X [name of women's NGO], I know this sounds awful, but if they're so radical, what can you expect to happen?' (A3c Interview 2010). Similarly, the director of an international NGO maintains: '[e]ngaging with religious leaders is a must to build trust, if there is to be any trust in Afghanistan' (A3b Interview 2010). It is undeniable that Islam is bound deeply in people's daily lives and spiritual beliefs, but by presenting aid effectiveness as a matter of observing the local religious protocols, it not only simplifies the complexities of gender issues and violence against women in Afghanistan, but also forces local NGOs to take up a religious front that can diminish their feminist politics, and adversely impact service delivery:

Informant: To appease the community and donors, we've had to pretend the [domestic violence] program is something to help women to become better housewives and mothers...

Interviewer: Why do you have to say that?

Informant: We have to maintain feminist politics in our service delivery, but donors don't understand that...It's hard enough to monitor staff, and make sure they don't impose their own values upon women, like asking them what have they done to deserve the beating (A2b Interview 2010).

For projects such as 'Happy Family, Healthy Community' there is also the challenge of monitoring and evaluating behavioural change. While the project has a good accountability mechanism for the workshop facilitators (including requiring the local doctor, cleric, and

government representatives to all write separate reports after each information workshop in the local community), there is a potential challenge in assessing behavioural changes for local male participants. As the project comes from the angle that ‘the only things that can solve the problems of family and community are the orders and commands of Islam’ (UNFPA et al., date unknown, i), it would be difficult for project participants (or their wives and families where private, triangulate interviews<sup>16</sup> were conducted) to discuss resistance to behavioural change, as it would suggest being ‘un-Islamic’ despite weeks or months of workshops on Islam and gender.

## Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that the complexity and challenges faced by civil society organisations working to end violence against women in occupied Afghanistan cannot be solved by a focus on religion alone. As a social movement, religion can be as much a divisive force as a uniting one, thus international aid agencies and academics should not overlook the implications of instrumentalizing faith-based movements in the name of gender equality. 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, these processes are situated within the following: a larger framework of donor politics that at times constrain and frustrate local partners’ efforts; a political environment at the national and local level that has been historically unfriendly to women; a changing political economy that in turn affects local cultures and traditions; and a fragile peace-building process in which the space for women to articulate their rights and concerns is diminishing.

Furthermore, within the politically sensitive climate of military occupation and security risks, while both civil society organisations and the foreign military forces attempt to localise their projects within Afghanistan’s cultural and social framework for different reasons, civil society should use this opportunity to question their motives for doing so, and whether there is a genuine effort to engage with local communities and cultures. As Sholkamy (2011, 53) observed: ‘It would be illusionary to assume that religious authority is “pure” or un-mediated by power.’ In the Afghanistan case study which I have presented, the ‘power’ in question is an uneasy mix of gendered politics, military occupation, and international aid.

Civil society would do well to examine its own motives and rationales for using a religious framework. While some would argue that local communities accept gender projects that are based on Islam and instructed by local religious authorities, the question we should ask is whether acceptance was based on an understanding of why gender is important, or was it for the sake of piety? Little is changed if communities are simply bowing to the pressures of

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<sup>16</sup> Triangulation is a research method where two (or more) different sources were used to verify the findings. For instance, if a research project is about whether a community’s attitude about domestic violence has changed after an awareness raising campaign, the researcher may use several different methods to verify: by interviewing the local people; checking police records for reporting on domestic violence (typically domestic violence reporting would increase as result of greater awareness); identify whether there has been an increase in demand for services which provide support to domestic violence survivors, etc.

local leaders and aid agencies. If this is so, then the occupation of Afghanistan will be two-fold: an occupation of the military and of aid.

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