

# Women in Afghanistan: passive victims of the *borga* or active social participants?

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## Introduction

Since the early 1990s there has been a flourishing literature on gender, war, violent conflict, and reconstruction (see, for example, Benjamin and Fancy 1998; Bennett *et al.* 1995; Bunch and Carrillo 1992; Jacobs *et al.* 2000; Lentin 1997; Nikolic-Ristanovic 1996; Turshen and Twagiramariya 1998; Wallace 1993). Moser and Clark (2001), in particular, provide a comprehensive global understanding of the complex gender issues in armed conflict and political violence.

This paper has particularly benefited from Moser and McIlwaine's analysis of gender and social capital, which the authors define as 'the rules, norms, obligations, reciprocity, and trust embedded in social relations, social structures, and ... institutional arrangements that enable its members to achieve their individual and community objectives' (Moser and McIlwaine 2001:179; Narayan 1997:50). They argue that, in the wake of war and violent conflict, it is essential to reconstruct social capital within communities as well as to intervene to improve economic and physical capital (e.g. infrastructure, employment opportunities, etc.), political infrastructure (formation of state and other institutions), and human capital (education, health, etc.) (Moser and McIlwaine 2001; Simpson 1998).

In the context of Afghanistan, this analysis is important because, with notable exceptions (for instance, Collett 1996; Langen 2001; Mertus 2000; Moghadam 1994a, 1994b; Shah 2001; Wolfe 1992), the dominant portrayal of women has shown them 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 organised around gender-related survival strategies and, in the process, became aware of more gender-specific concerns. They worked together

in groups and organisations, generating networks, norms, and trust in their communities. I hope, therefore, that by articulating the voices of women in Afghanistan, their views and demands will be incorporated in the shaping of the agenda for the process of reconstruction, rather than allowing the agenda to be set solely by facilitators, academics, and aid workers.

This paper is based on qualitative participatory research, principally involving six days of detailed observational study and 126 interviews – 11 with individual women leaders of organisations, and eight group interviews in different institutions with 123 women and three men.<sup>1</sup> This approach enabled me to ask questions that encouraged women to express their feelings and share their experiences. However, my work was confined to six days in Kabul, and further research is needed. For example, Participatory Urban and Rural Appraisal (PRA) (Chambers 1994; Moser and McIlwaine 1999, 2000) could provide useful tools for an appropriate quantitative and qualitative analysis of the needs of women and men in Afghanistan in the process of reconstruction. The PRA approach has been criticised for failing to reach the poorest of the poor and to redefine the hierarchical relationship between local communities and development organisations (Cooke and Kothari 2001). However, it could be useful, to some extent, to give prominence to the voices of men and women in Afghanistan.

## **Women and men experience war and violent conflicts differently**

Many of my interviewees argued that in some ways women's situation was worse during the civil war than during Taliban rule. This is because so many women were murdered and raped by the Mujahidin. The Taliban disarmed the warlords and brutally enforced its own model of law and order. It imposed the *borga* on women and executed those women who did not obey its law. Those who did obey had some freedom of movement. But, during this period, economic activities came to a halt, poverty and hunger led many women to become sex workers, and some were forced to marry members of the Taliban, as its way of 'ending prostitution'.

Reliable statistics are scarce. According to my interviewees there are approximately 35,000 women-headed households in Afghanistan, mainly because so many men were killed during the war years and under Taliban rule (1996–2001). These women are called *zanane bee sarparast* (unprotected women), itself a derogatory term. In the

post-Taliban era, they have been cast out by both family and community. They constitute the poorest of the poor and intra-familial violence against them has increased. Many women believe that there is a real danger of a large number of women being socially excluded because they are beggars, sex workers, or household heads.

A section of the Refugee Centre in Kabul is set aside for *zanane bee sarparast*. When I was there for a visit, the women refugees claimed that between 2500 and 3000 women-headed households lived there. They were separated from the other households and lived as a separate community. They said: 'Because we are *bee sarparast* we receive less food from the aid agencies. This is because many of us are not registered and do not possess an official card to receive help.' Also 'there is no soap or cleansing materials and we suffer more than men because of our monthly menstrual period'. When I asked them how they survived, they replied, 'We produce handcrafts and sell them to raise some money for ourselves and our children and we go begging in the streets.' Indeed, Kabul's streets were full of beggars, especially women and children.

After 22 years of war and violent conflict in Afghanistan, women, men, and children are suffering from malnutrition and various diseases. There are also specific health problems deriving from the war, both physical and psychological. Years of repression, deprivation, and dire socio-economic conditions have severely affected the mental well-being of most citizens. As Soraya Parlika, head of the National Union of Women of Afghanistan, explained: 'We all suffer from the psychological pains of the war and destruction. It is going to take a long time to reduce and cure the pains of Afghan women, especially the women-headed households and the orphanages.'

It is important to analyse the health issues facing women and girls in relation to the cultural specificities of Afghanistan. Many women have been subjected to rape, forced marriage, torture, killing, fear, domestic violence, social exclusion, and separation from their home and family members. Any interview that I conducted, be it with individuals or groups, often resulted in the women bursting into tears and wanting to talk about their losses. This is, for example, what Zakereh Asgarzadeh had to say:

*'I was a school teacher. I lost my leg and my arm when a bomb went off eight years ago, during the civil war. Despite this I got married and had two children. My older son was born with a heart problem linked to the incident, which gives me recurrent nightmares. Some members of my*

*family, friends, and neighbours believe that it was a good thing that I got married and had children; others think that I should not have. I don't know what is wrong and what is right. Sometimes I feel like committing suicide.'*

Sohayla, a journalist, said: 'My three brothers were killed during the civil war and under Taliban rule; this is a terrible loss.' A woman in the Kabul Refugee Centre also expressed her sense of loss: 'I was not a poor woman, I had a nice home, [but] we lost everything. Years of unemployment, war, and destruction led me to go begging in order to feed myself and my children.' I did not meet any sex workers to interview, but many of the women I did speak to told me that they knew of many women 'who had no choice but to sell their bodies to feed themselves and their children'.

Issues frequently mentioned by my interviewees concerned inter-familial violence against women; the isolation and marginalisation of women-headed households; and men's derogatory perceptions of women in society at large. As a number of women in the Ministry of Women explained, 'most men were and are against Taliban and fought against Taliban (some of them died for their cause). But they have the same [backward] attitude as Taliban about women's place in the society'.

The low social status of women, and the consequent power imbalances between women and men that it generates, are the underlying reasons for harmful and discriminatory practices and physical and sexual abuse against girls and women in Afghanistan. The responsibility for this injustice and violence lies not only with the immediate family but also with individual communities, religious organisations, health and education institutions, professionals, and law enforcers.

The provision of resources and opportunities for women to tell and share their experiences as part of a healing process is a vital element in the post-war reconstruction effort. 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,<sup>2</sup> especially for sex workers in the context of Islamic law. But with the assistance of women's organisations, 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. For example, the case of Iran, analysed by Rostami Povey among others (Rostami Povey (Poya. M.) 1999:122-57, 2001:44-73), demonstrates that the negative image of *zanane bee sarparast* can be eradicated. As a result of efforts by women's

media and the encouragement of debates over the issue, this term is no longer used in Iran and has been replaced by *zan sarparast*, which means simply women-headed households.

## **Women's coping strategies and empowerment**

Survival strategies are deeply embedded in the material conditions of life. It is usually the poorer sections of society which remain in the war-stricken areas during times of violent conflict, while those with economic opportunities usually migrate elsewhere. However, significant minorities of professional women remained in Afghanistan or have returned to their country. For these women, survival strategies were based on forming networks and groups in solidarity with poorer women. For over 20 years, and especially under Taliban rule, these networks and forms of solidarity became mechanisms for women's empowerment.<sup>3</sup> Based on women's life and work histories, this section will discuss the circumstances under which this happened.

### ***Professional women's survival strategies***

Many prominent women chose to stay in Afghanistan and work, either openly or clandestinely, towards empowering other women (as well as children). For example, Soraya Parlika, head of the National Union of Women of Afghanistan, became an integral part of the women's movement there:

*'We witnessed 22 years of war, terror and bombing. We have an ancient saying, Shenidan Kay Bovad Manande Didan (it is one thing to hear about something, but quite another to see it with your own eyes).*

*Under the Mujahidin, the weapon of one community against another was to attack, to jail, to rape, to hit in public the female members of the other community. Under the Taliban, women were denied their basic rights to education. Throughout, we continued our activities, openly and secretly, and this allowed us to hold hands with each other and survive.'*

Other examples abound. The non-governmental Women's Vocational Training Centre has been active for 20 years and has offered women in Kabul courses in English and German as well as computer-skills courses. Its activists have also provided courses in handcrafts, animal husbandry, bee-keeping, and honey making in rural areas outside Kabul. They created income-generating activities for women. Shafiqqa Moaber, the director, told me, 'we had 6000 students from seven to 35 years of age. When Taliban came to power, they closed down

our institution. But we continued our underground activities in our homes. Many times we were threatened with imprisonment and torture, but we continued.'

Ghamar, another active member of this organisation, also explained how the group is attempting to include children who face social exclusion because of their different forms of disability: 'There are a large number of children who are blind, deaf, and/or maimed because of the civil war and the bombings of 2002. We have started to identify them in different parts [of the country], teach them different skills, and include them in our projects according to their abilities.'

During Taliban rule, the Women's Association of Afghanistan funded and managed secret sewing, knitting, and handicraft courses for women. Shafiqa Habibi, a leading member of this organisation, explained:

*'These courses took place in the homes of the teachers. Sometimes we had to change our venue for fear of persecution by the Taliban, but we continued. Our activities enabled many women to make clothes and other necessities for themselves and their families, and sometimes they sold or exchanged their products with other women.'*

After the fall of the Taliban, the Association was planning to extend its activities to include literacy classes.

The doctors in the Rabee Balkhi Women's Hospital were all educated in Kabul. Setting up the hospital had the advantage of allowing these women to perform surgery. Dr Rahimeh Zafar Setankazi, the hospital manager, explained:

*'surgery was the domain of male doctors. During Taliban rule, only female doctors were allowed to attend to female patients. Throughout this period we remained in Afghanistan and worked in the hospital with barely minimum facilities and without being paid. We did it to serve our people and the poorest of the poor in our country.'*

Mahbobeh Hoghghmal is a lawyer and the assistant commissioner in charge of organising Loya Jirga, the Grand Council of 21 people chosen by the United Nations out of 1000 names put forward. This body will decide how the Council should convene and how the transitional government should be formed. It is hoped that the transitional government will be more representative of the diverse class, ethnic, and religious groups that exist in Afghanistan. Before Taliban rule, Hoghghmal taught law at the University of Kabul. Under the Taliban,

she taught in Peshawar and worked with women's NGOs in Peshawar on gender legal issues. She explained:

*'In my profession I learnt how women in Afghanistan are denied many rights. Under the Taliban, even the basic rights to education were taken away from them. My aim is to raise these issues in Afghanistan and at the international level to make women aware of their rights and to change the legal position of women in Afghanistan.'*

Seddighe Balkhi is the head of the Islamic Centre for Political and Cultural Activities of Afghan Women. She was a teacher. She left Afghanistan in 1981 and went to Khorasan in northeast Iran. She stated:

*'A large number of Afghan people migrated to Iran. I therefore decided to go and work with refugee women. We set up schools for Afghan women and provided opportunities for different groups of women to be in touch with each other. In cooperation with UNHCR in Iran, we identified 2500 female-headed households in Mashhad, the capital city of Khorasan, [although] I am sure there are many more that we did not reach. We set up courses for these women and provided opportunities for them to be involved in income generating activities.'*

Balkhi returned to Afghanistan in 1991 and continued her work with women in Mazare Sharif, Herat, Ghandehar, and Kabul.

### ***Poor women's survival strategies***

The majority of poor women in urban and rural areas never left Afghanistan. Those with the necessary skills turned their homes into underground schools. They were paid for these services by their neighbours, friends, and families. In this way, they were able to survive financially.

In a group interview with 39 women in the Ministry of Communication, women explained how they turned their homes into clandestine schools. They also knew the stories of other women:

*'Ghamar Jaan's husband was killed in the civil war. She had a daughter. She secretly taught more than 800 students in her home. Many of us paid her as much as we could, sometimes 20,000 Afghan [approximately US\$1.85 in 2002] a month to teach our children. This was very little money – she could hardly manage the household expenses – but it was better than nothing. Without her our daughters would have been illiterate.'*

Poverty in Afghanistan is predominantly the result of war and the collapse of economic activity. In an interview with six women journalists, they argued:

*'we are from middle-class backgrounds. We have university degrees. During the Taliban we worked in our homes, teaching, knitting, sewing, producing, and exchanging goods and services. Had we not done this, we would have been in the streets begging. Many poorer women with fewer skills were begging and some became sex-workers.'*

Networking and group solidarity enabled these women to remain in touch with each other. After the fall of the Taliban they began to work for different newspapers. In February 2002 they set up the *Cultural Journal of Afghanistan Women* and published the daily *Seerat* (Nature) to promote women's issues.

As stated above, women living under extreme forms of poverty who possessed few skills or who lost their male head of household had often no choice but to become beggars or sex workers. On 13 February 2002, I visited the Shrine of *Shahe Do Shamshireh* (the king with the two swords). Every Wednesday, a large number of very poor women visit the Shrine to pray for their dead, make wishes, and ask the saint (*Shahe Do Shamshireh*) to make them come true. I interviewed ten women at this Shrine. All of them were heads of household who had lost the men of their families in the civil war and during Taliban rule. They explained: 'We are *zanane be sarparast*, no male kin to look after us, we are outcast because of this, we are even ignored by the aid agencies; we only receive food and clothes from our female neighbours.' As the basis of their daily coping strategies, these poor women rely only on women's support networks to meet their bare necessities.

Despite the horrors of war and violent conflict, many women in Afghanistan have emerged empowered from such circumstances. They became aware of their own capacities to organise and found ways to survive. Organising in this way was an empowering process. As will be discussed in the next section, women's secret organisations and networks in Afghanistan were the only functioning organisations that were trusted by the community.

## **Women in Afghanistan as social participants**

As we have seen, a great many women school and university teachers were engaged in teaching girls, young women, and some boys in their neighbourhoods. Every single woman that I interviewed said that she



taught between ten and 60 students over a period of time, offering them different courses according to their skills. Some taught as many as 100–800 students at different times. The homes of these women and others with specific skills became community homes, mainly for girls and women, but also for boys, and were financed and managed entirely by women. It was by word of mouth that women and girls spread the news about the secret schools to their peers. They hid their books, notebooks, pens, and pencils under their *borgas*, and risked their lives by going to the secret schools every day. Here, many young women and girls, as well as some boys, not only received basic literacy and numeracy training, but also studied different subjects at various levels (biology, chemistry, engineering, English, German, Arabic, Quranic Studies, cooking, sewing, knitting, hairdressing, and other skills).

The levels of trust and support generated by these secret organisations can 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. In my discussion with 17 women in the Literacy Corps, I was told that they are organising tests so that girls and young women can obtain certificates for the skills they acquired during the Taliban years. Mohtarameh Najieh Zohal Zareh, the head of the Literacy Corps, said that 'to date, we have identified 2000 students in Kabul who can be awarded certificates'.

Of course, many women involved in education were caught by the Taliban. But even though they were persecuted, jailed, and tortured, they continued their bitter struggle. Marzia Adil, a journalist, related the following story:

*'Hadeya Malekzad taught 150 students in her home. Despite many threats from the Taliban, she continued her work. Now she is the leader of a group of women in her area and discusses with them the significance of education and employment. In a meeting with Soraya Parluka, the head of the National Union of Women of Afghanistan, 3000 women gathered together on top of the one of the hills around Kabul to raise their demands with [her].'*

Shukkria Barekzai Dawi, chief editor of the weekly newspaper *Ayeene Zan* (Women's Mirror) in association with the Asia Institute, also described the impact of her secret organisation: 'We were 23 women working as teachers. We taught 650 students [who] ... did not know about our NGO ... [But] I am proud today that they have realised that their secret lessons were organised by our NGO.'

These women became an inspiration for other women who risked their lives under Taliban rule to give cohesion and solidarity to their communities. Their secret organisations have gained the trust and support of their communities. Many men also supported the secret schools. Shukkria Barekzai Dawi, for instance, has said that her husband 'devoted his wealth to our institution'.

Women's determination and optimism enabled them to reclaim their rights following the fall of the Taliban regime. Some began publishing newspapers. In February 2002 there were two women's newspapers in Kabul, *Women's Mirror* and *Nature*. When I visited the Ariana Women's Vocational Training Centre, the centre's members were planning to launch a newspaper on 8 March 2002 to celebrate International Women's Day. They said, '[w]e are hoping to continue to publish our paper either as a weekly or daily after 8 March, depending on our limited budget'. Many women are also actively participating in rebuilding their organisations, regrouping their members, and creating new opportunities for women to learn skills in order to engage in income-generating activities. The high level of trust placed in such networks and associations demonstrates that women and women's organisations can play a critical role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan.

Under Taliban rule, women's activities were concentrated on running these secret schools, which could be described as meeting the practical gender needs of women (see Molyneux 1985; Moser 1989). In the post-Taliban period, they have begun to move towards addressing women's strategic interests by challenging patriarchal gender relations in Afghanistan. They have also challenged the Western perception of Muslim women, especially in relation to the *borga*.

When I was interviewing a group of 15 women in the Ministry of Women, a woman who came in from the street shouted, 'all I hear since the fall of Taliban is *chadory*, *chadory*, *chadory* (*borga*, *borga*, *borga*). My problem is not *chadory*, my problem is that I don't have any food to feed myself and my children.'

I asked several women at the Ministry of Women and at the Rabee Balkhi Women's Hospital about the issue of the *chadory*. They explained that, historically, the *chadory* is the traditional cover in most parts of Afghanistan, especially in rural areas. One of the doctors explained how diverse women's attitudes towards the *borga* and other traditions were in the pre-Taliban era: 'My sister went to school with *chadory*, [and] I went to school without [one]; ... some young women cycled to schools and universities.'

In urban areas, especially in Kabul, most women did not wear the *chadory*. The Taliban imposed it on them. However, women felt that:

*'after five years, ... [it has] become part of our culture, we feel comfortable with it. Our community and society do not accept women without chadory. We will not take it off just because the West wants us to ... Some of us may take it off once we are ready and our society is ready. To be pressured by the West to take off our chadory is as bad as Taliban imposing [it] on us [in the first place]. We have the right to choose what to wear.'*

The role of women leaders such as Sima Samar, the Minister of Women in the interim government, Mahbobeh Hoghghmal, Soraya Parlika, Seddighe Balkhi, Shafiqa Habibi, Shukkriq Barekzai Dawi, and Shafiqa Moaber is crucial in the process of reconstruction. However, as was strongly expressed by the doctors at the Rabee Balkhi Women's Hospital and the women staff at the Ministry of Communication:

*'this is not enough. Half of the population of Afghanistan deserves more Sima Samars and more women leaders, especially taking into consideration the needs of diverse classes and ethnic and religious groups in Afghanistan. We need more women in the process of negotiations and decision making.'*

## **Women's demands on the reconstruction process**

Many women I interviewed welcomed the end of Taliban rule. But they wanted the world to know that 'we have not forgotten that the Mujahidin were supported by America and Pakistan, who defeated the Soviet-backed ruling regime and came to power. It was the civil war which led Afghanistan to complete destruction and paved the way for Taliban rule.'

Indeed, the Soviet-backed regime was a repressive one, and in addition a degree of uneven socio-economic development occurred under the Stalinist model of modernisation. As this regime disintegrated, gender traditionalism, refurbished by the US-backed Mujahidin, with its concomitant violation of women's rights, resurfaced (see also Moghadam 1994a, 1994b).

Many women believe that a number of factors can threaten the sustainable reconstruction of Afghanistan. Among the difficulties and challenges they identified in a group interview at the Communication Centre were:

*'The continuing existence of different warring factions within the interim government; ... foreign military presence; the arming of different factions of ... warlords by the Americans and the Russians; the existence of Mujahidin and pro-Taliban individuals and groups within society; ethnic inequalities and conflict.'*

Many women feel that economic development is essential to a successful reconstruction project, since 'with economic reconstruction the conflicts may be less violent, as different groups will not feel so marginalised economically, politically, socially, and culturally'.

Many of the women I interviewed were also critical of the aid agencies. They perceived the international agencies as overcrowding Kabul, using the scarce resources for themselves without as yet producing anything. In the words of a staff member of the Ministry of Communication:

*'they come here, take over our houses, pay high rents, [and] create such high rates ... that we cannot afford to rent a room for ourselves [anymore]. They consume our water and electricity with their generators and we have no electricity and very little water. They eat our food, and we can't afford basic food for ourselves and for our children.'*

The question of evaluating development agencies in terms of their legitimacy and their capacity has been debated widely (see, for example, Korten 1990). Many Afghan women are demanding that the aid agencies take into account their local conditions. Seddighe Balkhi, for instance, believes that these agencies 'could help develop a sustainable [form of] agriculture. We have oil, gas, copper, coal, gold, precious stones; we could be a rich country. We have been attacked by all sides for too long; today we need help reconstructing our economy.'

Mohtarameh Najieh Zohal Zareh from the Literacy Corps argued that:

*'With the fall of Taliban our children are ready to go to school. But there is no school. In Kabul, which is less ruined than other parts of Afghanistan, you will not find one school that is not completely or half ruined. We need our schools to be re-built.'*

Zakereh Asgarzadeh, who lost her arm and leg in the bombing, expressed the demands of the large number of disabled people and argued that access to certain resources – such as the provision of wheelchairs, buses with wheelchair access, and ramps – could enable them to become economically active. 'If I am provided with these facilities, I can teach again', she said.

Sharifeh Halim and Ziba Popol, who are active in the National Union of Women of Afghanistan, work closely with Zakereh and other disabled women. They argued that there is a great need for co-operation among women's organisations, women leaders, and the grassroots to properly articulate women's voices and demands.

Some women believe that the process of reconstruction must take into consideration the gender dimension of the needs of women and men. As Soraya Parluka has argued, there is great potential to engage women in income-generating activities: 'Traditionally, women have been involved in animal husbandry, dairy products, and handicrafts – these are areas where we could help women.'

The importance of building a channel of communication between women political leaders and ordinary women and/or of creating links among women and women's groups, including those who are facing repression (for example, *zanane bee sarparast*), are topics that are constantly discussed among women. At the Ministry of Communication, for example, I was told the following:

*'Many women have no security in the home or outside of the home. We also need equality of opportunity in education and employment ... Now that we have the Ministry of Women, we must organise a branch of this Ministry in every workplace to look into women's needs and demands.'*

Throughout the violent conflict, women's NGOs also remained in touch with each other and with female members of the community through networking and solidarity groups. In the post-Taliban era, these organisations have become important agents for reconstruction. In a post-conflict period in which the state does not yet exist in any real sense, women's NGOs are playing a crucial role, particularly in relation to education, training, and skills to create opportunities for women to have access to income-generating activities, thus contributing to household well-being. As Shukkria Barekzai Dawi explained:

*'there are 136 women working in our NGO. We work with the refugees; we work as health workers in the hospitals. We have literacy classes in poorer areas and we teach women handicrafts in order to generate incomes for themselves and their families.'*

These organisations do not receive funds from any national or international institution, but rely instead on the support of individual Afghan citizens. Reflecting on this situation, Shukkria told me: 'We have asked for financial help, but nobody has helped us financially.'

If we [were to] receive financial help, we [would] have great potential and opportunities to expand our work and help our people.’

Some women expressed their willingness to be role models for other women in order to break the taboo about women-headed households and to explain why certain women were forced to become sex workers. They were willing to tell their stories on radio and television programmes, either sharing them themselves or having their stories written by other women in newspapers and magazines. When I asked them why they feel it is so important for women to tell their stories, their answer was that, through sharing common experiences, ‘we understand each other’s pain better’. They also want their voices to be heard by the whole world.

Despite years of war and violent conflict, I felt incredible optimism and hope listening to all the women I spoke to. Women’s willingness to participate in the process of reconstruction is indeed very exciting, and promises to be quite rewarding. Their optimism and willingness is the result of their years of struggle as social actors, and policy makers would do well to take note of their remarkable achievements. As Mayra, a Ministry of Communication worker, put it:

*‘I was in my last year of completing my PhD when the Taliban took power. I did not have the opportunity to leave the country and I suffered many years of war and terror [along with] millions of others. I feel that I know more about the needs of our community than those who left the country. I feel that people like me should be involved in the process of reconstruction.’*

## Conclusion

As I have attempted to show in this paper, women in Afghanistan have bravely shown their capacity to devise ways of coping with life, even under the most extreme forms of coercion. As social actors, women have experienced 22 years of war, civil war, and violent conflict, and have sought alternative ways of surviving and formulating their objectives within a context of restricted resources and restrictive cultural practices.

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 organisations empowered many women; creating networks of trust and reciprocity in their

neighbourhoods, among their friends and relatives, and also within their communities. To ignore women and their organisations in the process of reconstruction would deny women in Afghanistan the right to rebuild and solidify their new reality. It is vital for policy makers and aid workers not to ignore economic and social issues, particularly at the present time, when the interim government in Afghanistan and countries in the West seem to be so preoccupied with political and military issues.

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## Notes

- 1 My intention was not to marginalise men, but to give prominence to women's voices in identifying their needs in the process of reconstruction in Afghanistan.
- 2 In the context of South Africa see Krog (2001).
- 3 In the context of Latin America see Johnson (1992).

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