Women in Afghanistan, Passive Victims of the Borga or Active Social Participants?1

Elaheh Rostami Povey
Development Studies Lecturer

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Abstract
The paper discusses how women’s experiences of war and violence in Afghanistan. Also it discusses their different coping strategies and how networking and different forms of group solidarity became mechanisms for women’s empowerment. The paper also discusses the rule of women in the process of reconstruction.

Introduction
This paper, based on field research in Kabul in February 2002, will first discuss how women experience war and violent conflict differently to men, in particular by defining different types of violence against women in Afghanistan. Second, by identifying individual Afghan women, as well as women’s networks and organizations, I will discuss their different coping strategies and how networking and different forms of group solidarity became mechanisms for women’s empowerment. Third, I will demonstrate how, throughout the rule of Taliban, many women risked their lives by

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turning their homes into an underground network of schools for girls and young women. I will argue that as social actors, they created cohesion and solidarity in their community. Their secret organizations have already laid the foundation for the building of social capital, which is crucial for the process of reconstruction in Afghanistan. In the final section, I will propose that women in Afghanistan as social actors are optimistic and willing to participate in the process of reconstruction. As a researcher I intend to voice their views and their demands, which I hope, will be taken into consideration by policy makers and aid workers.


This paper has particularly benefited from Moser and McIlwaine’s analysis of gender and social capital (2001: 178-200). They define social capital as “the rules, norms, obligations, reciprocity, and trust embedded in social relations, social structures and societies institutional arrangements that enable its members to achieve their individual and community objectives” (p179; Narayan 1997:50). They argue that in post war and post violent conflicts eras it is important to reconstruct social capital within countries as well as to intervene to improve economic or physical capital (infrastructure, employment opportunities…) and political infrastructure (formation of state and other institutions) and human capital (education, health and so on).

In the context of Afghanistan this analysis is important because, with a few exceptions, the dominant view portrayed women in Afghanistan as passive victims of war, violent conflicts and political repression, only to be liberated by western military intervention. Twenty-two years of war and violent conflict eroded social capital in Afghanistan. However, women organized around gender-related survival needs and in the process became aware of more gender-specific concerns. They worked together in groups and organizations and generated networks, norms and trust in their community. I, therefore, hope that by raising the voices of women in Afghanistan, their views and their demands will determine the agenda for
the process of reconstruction, rather than the agendas set by the facilitators, academics and the aid workers.

This research is based on a qualitative participatory approach, principally involving six days of detailed observational study and 126 interviews - eleven interviews with individual women, leading members of women’s organisations and eight group interviews in different institutions with 123 women and three men\(^{(3)}\). This approach enabled me to ask questions that encouraged women to express, enhance and share their experiences. However, my work was confined to six days in Kabul. In my view, further research is crucial. For example, Participatory Urban and Rural Appraisal (Chamber 1994: 953-69, Moser and McIlwaine1999 and 2000) could provide tools for an appropriate quantitative and qualitative analysis of the needs of women and men in Afghanistan in the process of reconstruction. This approach has been criticised for not necessarily reaching the poorest of the poor and not necessarily redefining the hierarchical relationship between local communities and development organisations (Cooke and Kothari 2001). However, it could, to some extent, give prominence to men’s and women’s voices in Afghanistan.

**Women experience war and violent conflicts differently to that of men**

Many of my interviewees argued that in some ways during the civil war women’s situation was worse than the period under the rule of Taliban. 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 *burga* on women and executed those women who did not obey its law. Those who obeyed 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 with members of Taliban, as their way of “ending prostitution”.

Reliable statistics are scarce in and about Afghanistan. According to my interviewees there are approximately 35000 female headed households in Afghanistan, mainly because their male kin were killed in the war years and the Taliban era. These women are called *Zanane bee Sarparsat* (unprotected women), itself a derogatory term. In the post Taliban era, they have become outcast by the family and the community. They constitute the poorest of the poor and intra-familial violence against them has increased. Many women believed that “there is a real danger of social
exclusion of a large number of women as beggars, sex workers and female headed households.

A section of the Refugee Centre in Kabul is specified to *zanane bee sarparast*, When I visited the Refugee Centre in Kabul, according to the women refugees 2500 - 3000 female headed households lived in the centre. They were separated from the male headed 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 menstruation period”. I asked them how they survive? They said "we produce handicrafts 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.

Women, men and children in Afghanistan, after 22 years of war and violent conflicts are suffering from malnutrition and various diseases. There are also specific health problems in relation to war, physical and psychological issues. Years of repression, deprivation and dire socio-economic conditions have severely affected the mental well being of the majority of citizens. Soraya Parlika, the 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 female headed households and the orphanages”.

Therefore, it is important to analyse women’s and girl’s health issues in relation to cultural specificities of women in Afghanistan. Many women have been subject to rape, forced marriage, torture, killing, fear, domestic violence, social exclusion and separation from their home and family members. Any interview that I conducted whether with individuals or groups of women often led to the women bursting into tears and wanted to talk about their losses.

Zakereh Asgarzadeh, explained: “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 married and have two children. My older son was born with a heart problem linked to the incident, which give me recurrent nightmares. Some members of my family, friends and neighbours believe that it was a good thing that I married and have 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 explained: “My three brothers were killed during the civil war and the rule of Taliban, this is a terrible loss”.

A woman in the Kabul Refugee Centre explained: “I was not a poor woman, I had a nice home, 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 told me “I know so many women who had no choice than to sell their bodies to feed themselves and their children”.

A number of issues frequently mentioned by my interviewees were in relation to inter-familial violence against women by male kin; the isolation and marginalisation of female headed households and men’s perceptions of women in the wider society. As a number of my interviewees 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 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 are the underlying reasons for harmful and discriminatory practices and physical and sexual violence against girls and women in Afghanistan. The responsibility for this injustice and violence lies not only with the immediate family but also with each community, 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 a healing process is a vital part of the process of reconstruction. Many women may not want to use such opportunities to voice the truth because of wider personal and political implications\(^4\), especially in the case of sex workers in the context of Islamic law. But women themselves with the aid of women’s organizations, women’s media and non-governmental organisations could play an important role in breaking the taboos and be instrumental in changing deep level of gender relations.

The example of Iran (Rostami Povey [Poya] 1999: 122-157; 2001:44-73) demonstrates that the negative image of *zanane bee sarparast* can be
eradicated. With the efforts of women’s media and debates over the issue of *zanane bee sarparast*, this term is no longer used in Iran and is replaced by *zan sarparast*, female headed households.

**Women’s Coping Strategies and empowerment**

Survival strategies are deeply embedded in the material conditions of life. During the war and violent conflicts it is usually the poorer sections of society which remain in the war stricken areas, and those with economic opportunities usually migrate to other areas. 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 solidarity with poorer women. Over a period of 22 years, especially under the rule of Taliban (1996-2001, these networks and forms of solidarity became mechanisms for women's empowerment\(^5\)). Based on women's life and work histories this section will discuss under what circumstances this occurred.

**Professional women’s survival strategies**

Soraya Parlika, the head of The National Union of Women of Afghanistan chose to stay in Kabul and to be part of the women's movement in Afghanistan. She explained, "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, but quite another to see it with your own eyes). Under the Mujahidin, the weapon of one community against the other community 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, this allowed us to hold hands with each other and survive".

The Women Vocational Training Centre, a non-governmental organisation (NGO), has been active for 20 years. Women activists in this NGO provided courses in English and German languages and computer skills for women in Kabul. They also provided courses in handicraft, animal husbandry, apiculture and honey making in rural areas outside Kabul. They created income generating activities for women. Shafiqa Moaber, the director of the institution explained, "we had 6000 students from 7 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 their institution is attempting to include many children who are under the threat of social exclusion because of their different forms of disability: "there are a large number of children who are blind, deaf and/or maimed in the civil war of the 1992-1996 and the bombing of 2002. We have started to identify them in different parts and teach them different skills and include them in our projects according to their abilities"

During the rule of Taliban, the Women's Association of Afghanistan, NGO funded and managed sewing, knitting and handicraft courses secretly for women. Shafiqa Habibi, a leading member of this institution 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 Taliban, this institution was planning to extend their activities to the provision of literacy classes.

The female doctors in the Rabee Balkhi Women's Hospital were all educated in Kabul. Setting up the hospital had the advantage of allowing the women doctors to do surgery. Dr. Rahimeh Zafar Setankazi, the manager of the hospital explained, "surgery was the domain of male doctors. During the Taliban’s rule, only female doctors were allowed to attend to female patients. Throughout this period we remained in Afghanistan and worked in the hospital with bare minimum facilities and without being paid. We did it to serve our people and the poorest of the poor in our country".

Mahbobeh Hoghoghmal is a lawyer and the assistant commissioner to organise Loya Jirga, the grand council of 21 people, chosen by the United Nations out of 1000 names. This body will decide how the grand 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 classes, ethnic and religious social groups in Afghanistan. Before the rule of Taliban, she was teaching 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 the north east of Iran. She explained "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 co-operation with United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Iran, we identified 2500 female headed households in Mashhad, the capital city of Khorasan, 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". Seddighe 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 remained in Afghanistan. Those with skills turned their homes into underground schools. They were paid for the provision of their services by their neighbours, friends and family. This way they survived financially.

In a group interview with 39 women in the Ministry of Communication women explained how they turned their homes into secret schools. They also had special 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 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 the economic activity. In a group interview with six women journalists they argued, "we are from middle class background. We have university
degrees. During the Taliban we worked in our homes, teaching, knitting, sewing, producing and exchanging goods and services, if we did not do this, we would have been in the streets begging. Many poorer women with less 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 Taliban they began to work for different newspapers. In February 2002 they set up the Cultural Journal of Afghanistan Women and published Seerat (Nature) daily newspaper to promote women’s issues.

Under extreme forms of poverty, many of the poorest women with fewer skills and those who lost their male head of their family had often no choice than to become beggars or sex workers.

On Wednesday 13th February 2002, I visited the Shrine of Shahe Do Shamshireh (The King with the two swords). Every Wednesday, a large number of poorer women visit the Shrine to pray for their dead, make wishes and ask the saint (Shahe Do Shamshireh) to make their wishes come true. I interviewed ten women at this Shrine. They were all female headed households, who had lost the male members of the their families in the civil war and during Taliban’s 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”. These poor women rely only on the women’s support networks for basic necessities as the basis of their daily coping strategies.

Despite the horrors of war and violent conflicts many women in Afghanistan emerged from such times empowered. They became aware of their own capacities to organise and find new survival strategies. 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 organizations which were trusted by the community.

Women in Afghanistan as social participants

As was discussed in the previous section, in my discussion with many women, I learnt that so many women school and university teachers, were engaged in teaching girls, young women and some boys in their neighbourhood. Every single woman that I interviewed she taught between 10-60 students over a period of time, teaching them different courses...
according to their skills. Others with more opportunities taught 100-800 students at different times. The homes of these women and others with specific skills became community homes, financed and managed entirely by women, mainly for girls and women, but also for boys. It was by word of mouth that women and girls spread the news about the secret schools to other women and girls. They hid their books, notebooks, pens and pencils under their borga, risked their lives and went to the secret schools everyday. In these secret classes many young women, girls and some boys not only received basic literacy and numeracy, but also studied different subjects at different levels (biology, chemistry, engineering, English, German, Arabic, Quranic Studies, cooking, sewing, knitting, hair dressing and other skills).

The levels of trust and support of the secret organisations of women can be measured by widespread levels of teaching in women’s homes and the support they gave to each other in maintaining these secret meetings. In my discussion with seventeen women in the Literacy Corp I learnt that this institution is organising tests so that many girls and young women could obtain certificates for the skills that they acquired during the Taliban’s years. Mohtarameh Najieh Zohal Zareh, the head of the Literacy Corp Organisation explained "to this date, we have identified 2000 students in Kabul who can be awarded certificates".

As was discussed in the previous section, many women involved in education were discovered by the Taliban. They were persecuted, jailed and tortured, but they continued their bitter struggle. Marzia Adil, a journalist explained "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, she discusses with them the significance of education and employment. In a meeting with Soraya Parlika, 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 Soraya Parlika".

Shukkria Barekzai Dawi, chief editor of Ayeene Zan (Women's Mirror) Weekly newspaper in association with Asia Institute NGO also explained about the impact of her secret organisation. "We were 23 women working as teachers, we taught 650 students, the students did not know about our NGO, I am proud today that they have realised that their secret lessons were organised by our NGO".
These women became inspirations for other women who risked their lives under the rule of Taliban to give cohesion and solidarity to their communities. Their secret organisations have gained the trust and support of their communities. Many men supported women’s secret schools. Shukkria Barekzai Dawi the chief editor of Aeeneh Zan (Women’s Mirror) Weekly newspaper in association with Asia Institute NGO explained: “My husband devoted his wealth to our institution”.

Their determination and optimism enabled them to reclaim their rights following the fall of Taliban’s regime. Some began publishing newspapers. In February 2002, there were two women’s newspapers in Kabul (Women’s Mirror and Nature). When I visited Ariana Women Vocational Training Centre, they were planning to publish a newspaper for the 8th of March 2002, celebrating International Women’s Day. They explained: “we are hoping to continue to publish our paper either as a weekly or daily, after the 8th of March, depending on our limited budget”.

Many women are also actively participating in re-building their organisations, regrouping their members, creating opportunities for women to learn skills for the purpose of income-generating activities. This demonstrates that women and women’s organisations can play a critical role in the reconstruction of Afghanistan as a high level of trust is placed in women’s organisations.

Under the rule of Taliban, women’s activities were concentrated on provision of secret schools which could be described as practical gender needs of women(7). In the post Taliban period they are already moving towards the strategic interest of women by challenging patriarchal gender relations in Afghanistan. They are also challenging the Western perception of Muslim women, especially the view about the wearing of borga.

When I was interviewing a group of fifteen women in the Ministry of Women, a woman who came 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 many of my interviewees at the Ministry of Women and at Rabee Balkhi Women’s Hospital about the issue of chadory. They explained that historically chadory is the traditional cover in most parts of Afghanistan, especially in rural areas. One of the female doctors in Rabee Balkhi hospital explained how diverse was women’s attitude to borga in the pre-
Taliban era "my sister went to school with chadory, I went to school without chadory, some young women cycled to schools and universities".

In urban areas, especially in Kabul, most women did not wear chaodry. The Taliban imposed this on them. However, they felt that “after five years, this 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 do so. Some of us may take it off once we are ready and our society is ready. To be pressurised by the West to take off our chadory is as bad as Taliban imposing this on us. We have the right to choose what to wear”.

The role of women leaders such as Sima Samar as the Minister of Women in the interim government, Mahbobe Hoghoghmal, Soraya Parlka, Seddighe Balkhi, Shafiqa Habibi, Shukkriq Barekzai Dawi, Shafiqa Moaber, are crucial in the process of reconstruction. However, as it was strongly expressed by female doctors of Rabee Balkhi Women’s Hospital and the women workers of 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, ethnic and religious groups in Afghanistan. We need more women in the process of negotiations and decision making”.

**Women’s Demands for the process of reconstruction**

Many women who I interviewed welcomed the end to Taliban’s regime. But they wanted the world to know that “we have not forgotten that the Mujahidin were supported by America and Pakistan which defeated the Soviet Union’s backed ruling regime and came to power. It was the civil war (1992-1996) which led Afghanistan to complete destruction and paved the way for the Taliban’s rule”.

Indeed, the Soviet backed regime was a repressive regime but a degree of uneven socio-economic development occurred under the Stalinist model of modernisation. As this regime disintegrated, gender traditionalism, refurbished by the American backed Mujahidin and the violation of women’s rights, resurfaced(8).

Many women believed that there are a number of factors which could threaten a sustainable reconstruction of Afghanistan. In a group interview with thirty nine women at the Communication Centre, they argued: “The continuing existence of different warring factions within the Interim
government; the existence of foreign military presence; the arming of
different factions of the warlords by American and Russian; the existence of
Mujahidin and pro Taliban individuals and groups within society; ethnic
inequalities and conflict”. Many women believed that “with economic
reconstruction the conflicts could be less violent, as different groups will not
feel so marginalized economically, politically, socially and culturally”.

Many women were critical of the aid agencies. They perceived the
international aid agencies as overcrowding Kabul, using the scarce
resources for themselves without producing anything yet. The women
workers in the Ministry of Communication argued “they come here, taking
over our houses, paying high rents creating high rates to the extent that we
cannot afford to rent a room for ourselves. 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 (Korten 1990,
Hulme 1997, Alan and Thomas 2000). Many Afghan women were
demanding that the aid agencies take into account their local conditions.
Seddighe Balkhi believed that “they could help to develop a sustainable
agriculture. We have oil, gas, copper, coal, gold, precious stones, we could
be a rich country. For so long, we have been attacked by all sides, today
we need help to reconstruct our economy”.

Mohtarameh Najieh Zohal Zareh, the head of the Literacy Corp
Organisation argued that "With the fall of Taliban our children are ready
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 which is not
completely or half ruined. We need our schools to be re-build”.

Zakereh Asgarzadeh, who lost her arm and leg in the bombing, raised the
demands of many disabled people and how the provision of resources
could enable them to become economically active. "The provision of
wheelchairs, buses, where we can use the wheelchairs and building of
ramps. If I am provided with these facilities, I can teach again”.

Sharifeh Halim and Ziba Popol are active members of The National Union of
Woman in Afghanistan, headed by Soraya Parlika. They worked closely with
Zakereh and other disabled women. They argued that there is a great need for
cooperation between the women's organisations, women leaders and the
grassroots. "We have connections with women in the rural areas and the urban areas, we are in a position to raise their voices and their demands".

Some women believed that the process of reconstruction must take into consideration the gender dimension of the needs of women and men. Soraya Parlika argued that there is a great potential for engaging women in income generating activities "Traditionally, women have been involved in animal husbandry, dairy products and handicraft, these are areas where we could help women"

The importance of building a channel of communication between women political leaders and ordinary women; the creation of links amongst women and women’s groups including those who are facing repression, for example, zanane bee sarparast was discussed by many women. At the Ministry of Communication women argued that "many women have no security in the home or outside of the home, we also need equality of opportunity in education and employment with men. 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 conflicts, 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 they became an important agency of reconstruction. In the post-war/post conflict era, where the state does not yet exist in the real sense of the term, women’s NGOs are playing a very important role. As was discussed in the previous sections, they provide education, training and skills to create opportunities for women to have access to income generating activities, thus contributing to house-hold wellbeing. 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 institutions; individual charitable Afghan citizens fund them. Shukkria explained: “We have asked for financial help, but no-one has helped us financially. If we receive financial help, we 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 female headed households and
explain why a section of women in society became sex workers. They were willing to tell their stories on the radio and television programmes, and either write themselves or for their stories to be written by other women in the newspapers and magazines. I asked them why they emphasise women telling their stories? Their answer was, “we understand each other’s pain better”. They felt that it is important to share their experiences with diverse cultures of peoples of Afghanistan and they wanted their voices to be heard by the world.

Despite years of war and violent conflicts, I felt an incredible degree of optimism and hope. Their willingness to participate in the process of reconstruction was very exciting. This optimism and willingness is the result of women’s years of struggle, as social actors, which I hope, will be taken into consideration by policy makers. Mayra, a Communication worker argued “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. I suffered many years of war and terror like 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

Women and men in Afghanistan have bravely shown their capacity to devise ways of coping with life, even under most extreme forms of coercion. Women in Afghanistan, as social actors, experienced 22 years of war, civil war and violent conflicts and sought alternative ways of formulating their objectives according to their restricted resources and cultural practices.

The immediate needs of women, men and children in Afghanistan are economic reconstruction. However, as the findings of this research demonstrate, the centrality of the gender dimension is crucial in the processes of reconstruction. Women’s experience of war and violent conflict was different from men. Their secret organisations empowered many women; they created networks of trust and reciprocity in their neighbourhood, among their friends and relatives and at community levels. To ignore women and their organisations in the process of reconstruction means that women in Afghanistan will be denied the right of the reconstruction of their new reality. This is particularly important at the present period, when the interim government in Afghanistan and
western countries, are pre-occupied with political and military issues. It is, important for policy makers and aid workers to be more concerned with both economic and social issues.

Footnotes:
1. For this discussion also see Moser 2001 and Simpson 1998: 105-8.
3. My intention was not to marginalise men, but to give prominence voices in identifying the needs of women and men in the process of reconstruction in Afghanistan.
4. In the context of South Africa see Krog 2001.
5. In the context of Latin America see Johnson 1992: 147-172.
6. The currency of Afghanistan is Afghan. In 2002, 20,000 Afghan was equivalent of approximately US$1.85.
7. For this discussion see Molyneux (1985) and Moser 1989: 1799-1825 and 2001: 196
8. Also see Moghadam 1994

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