

The Role and Impact of Gender-Oriented NGOs in Afghanistan

Telephone-Interview with Ms. Adela Mohseni (27/1/2009)

Interviewee: Manija Gardizi

A number of proved and unproved allegations surround the spheres of NGO work in Afghanistan. Increasing disappointment and suspicion by the Afghan people about the effectiveness and channels of aid money in the field raise doubts about an appropriate program design and the adequacy of the techniques chosen to tackle corruption. The word 'NGO-ism' emerged around five years ago in the Afghan language and became quite important in the daily exposure to NGO-relevant issues. Currently an estimated 1700 international and national NGOs are legally registered in Kabul. The number was even reduced from 2400 unregistered NGOs after a new law was enacted in 2006. With taking into account the particular work of gender-oriented NGOs, the question arises as to how projects are on the one side perceived by the Afghan people and on the other side how the programmatic approach is contextualized to the given scenario in Afghanistan.

The following interview attempts to shed light on these issues. Ms. Adela Mohseni is an Afghan woman, who actively engages herself in consciousness raising and gender empowerment. She works for the Canadian NGO Droits et Démocratie/Rights and Democracy in Kabul and shows an altered perspective about what civil society NGOs can accomplish and what the limits of capacity-building, sustainability and understanding for the Afghan traditions are.

MANIJA GARDIZI: What kind of development is visible when looking behind 40 years of gender issues in Afghanistan?

ADELA MOHSENI: We face the huge problem that in former times as well as nowadays only the Afghan civil society and NGOs were and are employed with this particular issue. This derives on the one side from the support of the international donors, but also from the fact that traditional norms and analphabetism leave almost no space for action. This situation is further topped by the fact that the intellectual distance and gap between the small community of Afghan civil society and the large, rural parts of the Afghan population is enormous. The problem is that Afghan women are from birth until death doomed to injustice. It takes decades to turn this situation into a more democratized one. Until the idea of gender equality finds its roots to the smallest unit of society, but also in the institutions of the state, it will take a long time. Take the example of the Afghan Ministry of Education: Almost every class book for small children, pre-teens and teenagers show women only in the role of the housewife, whilst men have positions as pilots, engineers or policemen. We need to train our children in new perceptions of their mothers and sisters. Actually, we don't have to go very far away: Look at our male employees in gender and human rights specific NGOs. Most of these men are just repeating what internationals teach and train them, whilst in reality they live in their old, traditional and patriarchic way. I know a number of Afghan men working for these kinds of NGOs, pretending to have a democratic approach to life, but having two or even three wives at home. It is also a fact that even female members of parliament cannot resist their husband's decision of marrying a second wife. We have popular examples within the current parliament. Looking to the female side, a similar picture can be seen – Afghan women, even those working in democracy-propagating NGOs, are willing to be the second or third wife of a man. These examples show the urgent need to first start in Kabul before heading to villages and rural areas.

GARDIZI: How do you assess the currently ongoing gender programs implemented by the international community in Afghanistan? Are they adapted to the Afghan circumstances? Does an integration of Afghan, female activists take place within the programmatic approach?

MOHSENI: We have 70% analphabets in Afghanistan, the larger part of them are women. The people do not even have the slightest idea of democracy, gender equality or anything else. How can we impose Western ideas in such a fast way? The process of democracy took hundreds of years in Western civilization, and here in Afghanistan, the international community seeks to reach this aim in just a few years. We urgently need to first of all regulate very basic injustices within the Afghan society, e.g., the rights of the second or the first women. It is a fact that this form of matrimony is one of the leading ones. Accordingly, there is a need to regulate even the rights of the children of each wife. As long as men are allowed on behalf of the holy Koran to marry four wives, they will go on doing so. That is the reason why I pledge for more in-depth education from 1st grade to 12th grade for both men and women. And to do so we need foremost well-educated teachers and lecturers at the university. There are more than enough teachers in Afghanistan who are unable to read and write properly. I know of cases at Kabul University in which university lecturers ask female students to have immoral contact with them, in order to receive better grades. Anyway, we need to start gender-oriented education in traditional norm-setting. For example we often face the problem that mothers-in-law abuse their dominant position against the daughter-in-law. It is a quite prominent and widespread tradition which underpins the position of the mother-in-law. We need to tackle these inequalities first, before starting with the next level.

GARDIZI: Are there any long-established female, Afghan activists? In what kind of organizational structure do they work? Independently of international NGOs?

MOHSENI: There are a number of female activists, e.g., Soraya Talika or Gulalay Habib, who worked already during the communist regime in the framework of gender. These women are currently, from my knowledge, working for different NGOs. But I would like to make a further point: We are not just focusing on female empowerment; we also try to tackle injustices which also befall young men. When a female family member loses her husband, often the son of a close relative is forced to marry her, in order to shelter the children and the wife. Even if he is 15 years old and she is 20 years older. We often hear of such cases. This also applies to marriages in which men do not have a real say in regard to whom they would like to marry. Traditions are the core problem, and the victims of these old-established norms are men and women.

GARDIZI: There are a large number of international and national NGOs in Afghanistan and especially in Kabul. What do you think about this fact? Is the accusation of corruption within the NGOs true?

MOHSENI: People often forget that a huge number of Afghans live in Kabul. It is estimated that almost 3.8 million returnees are currently based in Kabul. This forms a remarkable part of the Afghan population. All these people have different needs. Additionally, we face the problem that a large part of the Afghan intelligentsia left the country. The few ones left are often not willing to work outside of the big cities like Kabul, Herat or Mazar-e-Sharif. These reasons can be possible causes for the high number of NGOs in Kabul.

I do not agree completely with the accusations made regarding corruption in international as well as national NGOs. It is, of course, true that Afghans feel betrayed when learning about the incredibly high salaries of international staff. They are also disappointed about the fact that most of the international staff doesn't even pay taxes, whilst earning about 10,000 US dollars a month. Anyway, the level of corruption encircling the Afghan administration is in no way comparable with the small and rather low level of corruption within the NGOs. At least there is a certain external authority overseeing the machinations compared to the lawlessness in Afghan administrations. I think a rather popular form of accusations against NGOs concerns program design and implementation. One can often observe that international NGOs lack an understanding of the Afghan traditional structures and norms. I can tell you about one ongoing example of an American NGO: They developed the idea to empower Jirgas and local Shuras, in order to improve cooperation on gender issues. I am totally shocked about this type of program design! How can internationals support traditional

institutions to accomplish gender equality? These institutions are, since decades, accountable for the misery of women. Jirgas and Shuras are wrongful institutions merely seeking self-enrichment and trying to perpetuate the patriarchic system. The moment we start to give Jirgas a legitimate position, we start to accept the illegal, unconstitutional machinations of such institutions. And to tell the truth, these people will never change. So at least we should stop providing these traditional institutions with legitimate grounds. We should rather try to empower judges and lawyers on the district and provincial level. Judges should be trained based on the system of 'rule of law'. Otherwise, discrimination against women by Mullahs and elders will never end.

GARDIZI: But these traditional institutions are just a fact in the Afghan decision-making and conflict-processing mechanisms. And people tend to avoid state-run institutions to solve their problems. Regarding this circumstance, what can a better cooperation look like?

MOHSENI: First of all, a state system based on the regulations of the 'rule of law' must be strengthened, so that Jirgas in general lose power. In a parallel fashion, we could try to negotiate with Mullahs in cities and in all rural areas to underpin gender equality. In religious terms, the Mullahs have an enormous impact on Afghan society. A possible form could be workshops for Mullahs, where we teach them about the Islamic rights of women.

GARDIZI: How should donor money be better coordinated? What do you think about the coordination body ACBAR?

MOHSENI: The work of the NGOs is based more on social and cultural change, and to a lesser degree on infrastructural development. Consequently, the effects of implemented programs are often not directly visible, like is the case with infrastructural projects. If we try to train people in human rights, we cannot see any effect in a timescale of 8-10 years. That is why Afghans often think that NGOs are corrupt and do not help. They want food, infrastructure and health care clinics, but they often do not comprehend the core needs of civil society, human rights, 'rule of law' and gender equality. But these things are not visible from a materialistic point of view. For example, if we train 20 Mullahs in gender sensitive issues, so that they speak at the Friday prayers about the rights of women, nobody sees a proper end product. It is not even possible to predict when the impact will start, and furthermore it is not visible like a school or a clinic.

GARDIZI: Thank you for the interview!