

From Afghanistan to Sudan: how peace risks marginalising women

by Lina Abirafeh

In Sudan, as in Afghanistan, the international community is hoping to tie aid to an agenda of gender equality. But have lessons from working with women and gender programmes been learned?

The ink on the Sudanese peace agreement is hardly dry. Afghanistan is far from reconstructed. And yet the aid community prepares for its move from Afghanistan and other conflict zones to set up camp in Sudan. Sudan is currently at the forefront of the international community's conflict/post-conflict agendas. As donors determine what type of aid – and how much – Sudan will receive, they need to heed suggestions before launching yet more ill-conceived gender-focused post-conflict interventions.

Extensive scholarship has shown that women are disproportionately affected by conflict. In 2000 UN Resolution 1325 (on Women, Peace and Security) called for the full inclusion of women in all aspects of international peace and security.¹ Conflict creates space for women by bringing new roles but also produces new vulnerabilities. Gender roles are in flux during conflict and the aftermath. Post-conflict situations are circuitous and often entail a relapse into violence.

Conflicts in both Afghanistan and Sudan have had a disproportionately negative impact on women. Long-running conflicts have led to an increase in the number of female-headed households and widows. Afghan and Sudanese women comprise the majority of refugees and the displaced. They suffer painfully high maternal mortality rates and illiteracy rates. It is estimated that 85% of Afghan women are illiterate. Four fifths of Sudanese women are illiterate, with higher rates among IDPs who have lost the social capital provided by family, kinship and community networks. In both countries women have borne the brunt of the violence and remain subjected to traditions and cultural practices

that reflect gender biases. Gender programmes are struggling to take gender into account. Both Afghan and Sudanese women are fighting to reverse perceptions that they have no agency, that they are victims. And both countries are experiencing increased levels of violence against women.

Transformation and social change

Conflict and its aftermath create opportunities for gender transformation. Gender identities are in flux, offering space for women to access new resources and claim new roles. In the aftermath, gender-focused international aid can play a role in helping women achieve such gains. Aid interventions themselves do not by themselves transform but can support or hinder women's potential in achieving transformation through their policies and programmes.

Sudanese women in Sudan (and those displaced to neighbouring countries) are playing a significant role in strengthening civil society and in building local and community capacity. Building upon this energy and action is crucial if the agenda is to foster social change. The Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) has been openly advocating gender equality. While this is a welcome sign, it could also be construed as a strategy to lure women into the national struggle. Only the aftermath of the peace process will reveal the true intent behind the rhetoric.

Development, particularly in the aftermath of conflict, is often conflated with radical social change. Visions of Afghan women throwing off their burqas in the name of freedom helped fuel the Bush administration's case for war against

Afghanistan. Despite all the rhetoric used to justify intervention, women in Afghanistan have been neither 'liberated' nor 'empowered'. Social change and transformation are long-term processes, working at a deep structural level to address gender inequalities. These are more than just outcomes; these are non-linear processes to be put in place entailing consciousness raising and women's agency. Social change and transformation are not simply introduced by development interventions. These must be negotiated at every level and on women's own terms – both in Afghanistan and Sudan. Such processes are contextual and local, raising doubts as to whether an international aid-imposed social change agenda is really the right approach.

In order to raise the probability of social change and to foster transformation for women, an integrated gender analysis needs to be applied to all aspects of the post-conflict aid intervention. This must take into account the roles and needs of both women and men in the aftermath of conflict. In Afghanistan women emphasised the neglect of men in development programming as an area of concern. Transforming the gender order entails a focus on both women and men. Local gender ideologies are already on unstable ground in the aftermath of conflict – gender interventions notwithstanding. Gender interventions can further exacerbate this instability, presenting a challenge to entrenched forms of patriarchy. Social change for women can benefit from lessons learned in Afghanistan. A genuine gender analysis has the potential to provide the foundation for sustainable social change because it takes into account the need to understand both women and men in their social roles.

The importance of a contextual analysis cannot be overstated. Absent from interventions in Afghanistan was the necessary research on local definitions of gender. This entails not only an understanding of the social construction of gender roles

but also an historical understanding of how these roles have fluctuated. A contextual analysis recognises that things happened before the international community arrived and that people exist in certain contexts that change over time. Understanding these crucial details contributes to better-formed interventions by knowing what is important to the communities supported and what they want to see changed. A contextual analysis reveals that women in both Afghanistan and Sudan do have agency – a long history of acting on their behalf and achieving gains. An understanding of women's agency entails letting the women take the lead – and believing that they can do it. Allowing people to participate in development interventions is not sufficient. They must own the process – and the outcome.

Unintended outcomes can emerge from gender-focused interventions when they fail to address gender issues, focusing only on women and stoking men's resentment. They also occur when development agendas advocate social change and transformation but fail to meet women's expectations or give them an active role in their own transformation. The perception that change is externally imposed can result in a backlash against women. Throughout modern Afghan history there have been periods where women's rights have been highly contested as they have been thought to be part of Western modernisation agendas.

In both Afghanistan and Sudan, women's victimisation has been publicised and nearly fetishised. The international media focuses on so-called 'cultural' forms of violence against women – such as rape as a weapon of war, stoning and other abuses. When these forms of violence appear to have subsided, the media is less interested in women and in documenting and reporting on their realities, whether violent or not.

As in Afghanistan US policy in Sudan is driven by determination to combat alleged terrorist links and Islamic fundamentalism. US sanctions are still in place and the US is only reluctantly engaged. There is nevertheless a risk that the arrival of international peacekeepers will impel the US, as it has done in Afghanistan, to recruit warlords – many of whom have

perpetrated acts of gender-based violence.

An engendered agenda for Sudan

In both of these vast ethnically diverse countries, building a sustainable peace must be broad-based and inclusive. Whatever 'peace' is sought must be locally owned, not internationally imposed. If the goal is to improve women's lives, women must be the ones to decide how this improvement is to take place and what kind of international support might be needed to bring it to fruition. Local women's organisations should take the lead in articulating women's needs and interests. For the international community, they would do well to talk less and listen more. In so doing, there is a chance to foster genuine dialogue and for all parties involved to talk with instead of talk to.

Genuine dialogue entails not only that with the international community but also dialogue between Sudanese women and men. This dialogue should start with women's genuine participation in the peace process. Afghanistan's own peace process demonstrates that quotas for women are not enough to achieve veritable participation. Quotas serve only to please donors by quantifying what remains beyond figures – engaging women in a meaningful way in the processes that determine their lives. Sudan can boast many champion women whose voices are being heard, and whose voices still need to be heard. To listen to these voices, the international community must look beyond the usual suspects to those who are not in the limelight.

The Government of Norway, the Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) led a consultative process which led to Sudanese women expressing their priorities and recommendations to delegates to the Oslo Donors' Conference on Sudan in April 2005.² Sudanese women are calling on the Sudanese authorities, the UN, IGAD and the donor community to:

- emphasise that violence against women will not be condoned and that its prevention is a priority
- build the capacity of local and

- national women's organisations
- ensure that women constitute at least 30% of all those holding positions in all transitional institutions established under the Comprehensive Peace Agreement
- establish a Ministry of Women and Gender Equality
- establish a Women's Fund within the Multi-Donor Trust Fund (MDTF) for women-specific programmes
- guarantee women's property rights
- provide vocational training opportunities for adult learners, targeting women in particular
- set up confidential reporting mechanisms and legislation that is enforced in order to bring perpetrators of gender-based violence to justice
- provide more psychosocial support for both women and men
- collect data on the impact of gender-based violence on women and girls, including as a result of armed conflict
- host an inclusive Sudanese Women's Conference to define a coherent, long-term agenda and strategy for accelerating women's empowerment and gender equality/equity.

Donors need to back up their rhetoric and demonstrate commitment to Sudanese women by increasing women's capacities and promoting gender equality and equity. Otherwise, the Sudanese reconstruction process runs the risk of further marginalising women. Not unlike Afghanistan.

Lina Abirafeh is the Senior Gender Focal Point and Head of the Gender Unit at the Joint Electoral Management Body Secretariat, Kabul.³ She is the former Country Director of Women for Women International, Afghanistan and is completing a PhD at the London School of Economics assessing the impact of gender-focused international aid in Afghanistan. She is the author of 'Burqa politics: the plights of women in Afghanistan'.⁴ Email: lalluneh@aol.com

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