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Caution Nation-Builders: Gender Assumptions Ahead

CHERYL BENARD

Leo Tolstoy's often-cited observation about families, "all happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way," can be applied to countries, too.¹ Recent research provides empirical evidence that "happy countries"—i.e., those who are at peace with their neighbors and are experiencing domestic tranquility, prosperity, and development—share a number of common traits.

Let us also note that there are multiple ways in which a country can be "unhappy." It can be involved in an external war. It can be experiencing a civil war. It can be crippled by poverty and stagnant development. Its population can be divided by ethnic and racial hatreds that cause injustice, violence, and suffering. It can be laboring under ineffective or corrupt governance. Studies indicate that even if violence is sporadic, ongoing volatility will undermine growth and security and prevent the country from thriving. Under an efficient but oppressive authoritarian regime, culture is likely to stagnate and the society is likely to suffer from the loss of connection to the rest of the world.²

And within each category of country, those that thrive and those that are floundering, there is a common thread: the status and condition of women. Patriarchal societies that treat women as inferior generally do the same to their ethnic and religious minorities. This is the result of a worldview that is often hierarchical and stratified, basing itself on divisions among groups and on the premise that different is unequal. Societies that permit the disenfranchisement and oppression of women are operating on

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a system that equates physical strength with social and legal entitlement. Almost inevitably, they extend the same logic to their domestic and international politics, so it is not surprising to find that they are inclined to resolve their disputes by readily resorting to force.³ Similarly, bureaucracies and elites that exclude women are operating on the logic of male privilege. This means that they are not merit-based, but follow the principle of entitlement. Consequently, it is unsurprising to find that such systems show higher levels of corruption.⁴ Likewise, the consequences of women's exclusion from economic activity are not difficult to predict. Such societies will be less prosperous, because they will have a higher dependency ratio; each wage earner will need to support a greater number of dependents.⁵ Since women's relegation to the domestic sphere usually goes along with their lower societal status, they will have less input in how the family income is spent, which generally means that less of it will be spent on children's health and education.⁶

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coming years, nation-building missions in complex post-conflict environments will continue to engage the United States and the international community. Policymakers and practitioners alike must take care to evaluate present nation-building exercises. This evaluation will need to be outcomes-based and give due focus to the female majority of the populations in question. In a recently completed project, RAND researchers studied the issue of gender as it relates to post-conflict stabilization and nation-building. We first reviewed

the broader literature on these subjects and then conducted a case study of post-Taliban Afghanistan. From that work, the following series of recommendations emerged and are discussed here in order of priority.⁷

TAKE THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN SECURITY SERIOUSLY

Sustainable livelihoods, safety, recourse against injustice, health, appropriate use of human capital, cultural vibrancy, education, and development are all interlocking components of human security. Those in charge

of post-conflict nation-building and reconstruction find themselves standing in the midst of a wasteland. Once the cannons have fallen silent, the next sound is the clamor of desperate needs—for food, security, medicine, water, shelter, education, and order to replace the chaos. It may sound sensible to prioritize, but that is hard to do in practice. In Afghanistan during the early phases of reconstruction, donors placed significant emphasis on reestablishing basic education—and rightfully so—after the collapse of Taliban rule. However, security did not keep pace, and attacks on schools, schoolchildren, and teachers are today threatening to reverse the accomplished gains. Economic development bolstered by foreign investments, it was hoped, would increase support for the new government and thus enhance stability. Instead, corruption, insecurity, and lack of capacity have discouraged most foreign investors. It is important to recognize the difficulty and complexity of nation-building challenges, but a conceptual reorientation might help. Instead of focusing on the exigencies of the moment, it may be better to maintain focus on the desired outcome as viewed through the eyes of the ordinary Afghan citizen. Each action or program might then be judged according to whether it can be expected to advance, or to obstruct, the attainment of that goal—or, put in another way, whether it is compatible or incompatible with the goal of advancing human security. A compromise undertaken to maintain stability, but which contradicts or undermines the larger goal, would not meet the test.

In the Afghan Loya Jirga, women were among the most outspoken opponents of the reinstatement of drug lords and warlords, despite the risks of attending such a public posture. In more than one instance, tribal elders from remote, highly conservative provinces not only sent a young woman as their envoy to the parliament but also later journeyed to the capital in her entourage to support her anti-corruption message.⁸ Today, it is well known that collaboration and inclusion of warlords has been one of the most detrimental obstacles to reconstruction in Afghanistan because it furthers a culture of corruption and general lawlessness. We can utilize gender as our canary-in-the-mine test. If a particular decision or compromise is bad for women, it will be bad for human security, bad for development, and detrimental to a genuine peace. Civil society in Afghanistan appeared to have an intuitive understanding of this connection.

GOALS SHOULD BE CLEAR AND UNEQUIVOCAL

Stakeholders in post-conflict contexts in the twenty-first century will usually agree that moving toward gender equality is a general goal.

This, however, leaves a great deal of room for different meanings, different timelines, and different envisioned outcomes. This ambiguity is potentially confusing and unhelpful. It would be much better to focus on creating a clear institutional understanding of goals with regard to women: one that is transparent to outside parties and national actors alike.

Groups engaged in post-conflict Afghanistan, for example, may define women's rights in many different ways. Women's rights could mean promoting respect for the traditional activities of women; conversely, it could mean promoting their access to nontraditional roles. The definition provides a frame for creating goals, which in turn motivates programming and execution that can be advanced via different structures. Quite conceivably, the goal of achieving "women's rights" without first properly defining this goal could lead to incompatible programs and undesired outcomes.

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Furthermore, when women's issues are separated from clearly anticipated outcomes, they exist on a moralistic, ideological cast that is helpful to no one. A healthy, peaceful society is one in which men and women have an equal part in public and economic life, can claim equal access to justice and societal resources, and can expect to enjoy an equitable quality of life. In developing world settings, international actors

sometimes convey the impression that equality is a covert program, one that they must insert into the proceedings by stealth and in small, careful doses. Underlying that approach is the sometimes openly expressed, sometimes unspoken, assumption that women's human rights are a radical innovation that can easily inflame a post-conflict world, a world whose streets are awash with surplus testosterone and whose men, demobilized from their armies and militias, are ready to rally afresh under the banner of male supremacy. Perhaps in consequence, advocacy groups may then take the opposite line, favoring grandiose proclamations that have little or no underpinning.

In Afghanistan in 2003, for instance, awareness-raising poster campaigns denounced domestic violence and sexual harassment. These are productive messages that support an eventual goal, but in Afghanistan at the time, they were for the most part not enforceable or realizable as outputs. A hypothetical woman who saw the poster and realized that her rights were being infringed upon had no practical course of action open to her whatsoever. There were no courts functioning according to principles of

contemporary rule of law, there were almost no lawyers, and a woman who sought protection from a violent husband or other relative could at best hope to be placed in jail for her own safety.

A middle ground between viewing women's rights as a potentially catastrophic luxury item to be introduced carefully and gradually, and viewing them as a moral imperative best distributed in the form of slogans and pronouncements can be found in the domain of pragmatic programs that move toward a clear and acknowledged societal outcome. The articulation of overarching goals will enable donors and implementers to coordinate their respective assessments of what is desirable and achievable for particular subgroups within the population. It will allow them to follow a sequenced approach in which, for instance, bolstering women's traditional roles can be seen as a midway point toward the ultimate goal of a more modern notion of gender equality. Clearer statements of goals will also support better evaluation of success and effectiveness.

In my view, the goal for women's rights activities in Afghanistan should include both a reference to traditional rights and positive principles as well as the introduction of contemporary global standards of human rights and gender equality. Returning to the earlier example of the economic arena, this would mean increasing access to nontraditional roles while also strengthening women's capacity to earn a livelihood through the monetization of traditional activities. Taking this fairly aggressive approach to social reform will require strong coordination among international and local NGOs and the Afghan government.

BUILD RELIANCE ON CIVIL SOCIETY

Under adverse circumstances and in the face of danger and death, Afghan women have played an active role in a range of humanitarian organizations. These organizations have provided education, health care, clean water, and political schooling. Today, such governance and reconstruction efforts are especially critical in the southern and eastern parts of Afghanistan, where the Taliban and other insurgent groups have been most active. NGOs give women an important vehicle with which to curb the power of insurgents and to support the nation-building and reconstruction effort. International actors should continue to focus on building this indigenous infrastructure across several domains. Backlash against the empowerment of women is inevitable, as is resistance to other core components of the nation-building and reconstruction effort such as poppy eradication, anticorruption measures, disarmament of militias, and so on.

Civil society mechanisms should also be encouraged to strive for a comprehensive overhaul of the justice system in Afghanistan. International and local groups should raise sensitivity for basic human rights by working together to create training programs for personnel in the judiciary and police forces. Such a focused effort will be more productive than a poster

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campaign. Civil society groups should act to modify or abolish laws such as the 1970s-era penal code and regulations, customs, and practices that constitute discrimination against women in family matters. In particular, reform of the criminal justice system should ensure that women are given legal equality with men in the right to freely choose a spouse, the right to enter into marriage only with full and free consent, and equal rights and responsibilities during marriage and its dissolution. Furthermore, Afghan authorities need to ensure that the law is implemented

by the courts in a way that provides equality in practice between men and women. Social service provisions to ameliorate the effects of incomplete application of the laws and to assist the victims of abuses are an important part of this solution.

In economic matters, nation-builders should place high value not only on programs that make women more productive in the work they already do but also on creating more opportunities for women. This means not simply training in traditional economic activities but also ensuring access to loans, finding ways to help women get products to market on their own, and otherwise helping them to move into other parts of the economy. In the early phases of nation-building, it is common to designate mass employment opportunities for men. Building roads, for example, offers quick employment to large numbers of individuals. Thought needs to be given to equivalent culturally acceptable mass employment opportunities for women. Sewing and embroidery, eventually followed by microcredit, often appear to be the only activities that occur to external actors when they think of women. The first two activities consign women to the realm of handicrafts and charity bazaars, marginalizing them from serious economic participation. Microcredit is a viable yet limited opportunity. Gender mainstreaming, an omnipresent catchphrase in other sectors of

nation-building, urgently needs to be applied in the domain of economic reconstruction.

Such efforts may challenge social mores and will be opposed by many men—and women—who view women's rights as a political, and not an economic, issue. However, traditional attitudes can also be tapped in support of these goals. For example, in Kabul, the establishment of a market—accessible only to female shoppers and where shops were operated exclusively by female merchants—aroused no objection; indeed, the market helped women to break into the hitherto exclusively male domain of shopkeeping and to acquire important new skills and confidence. Again, these mechanisms need to be considered holistically, and implemented thoughtfully, in reference to a larger plan and with careful consideration of potential unintended consequences.

Overall, the nation-building community should seek to integrate both genders into businesses where possible. While creating female-centered economic enterprises may be supported by communities in the short term as they attract aid, the enterprises could also create detrimental effects in the longer term, perpetuating a divide between women and men in the workplace. Studies of the more advanced economies of the Gulf states, in which parallel economic enterprises often exist, can shed greater light on the positive and negative aspects of this solution.⁹ I believe that parallel female and male decision making at all levels of society should be eroded. Instead, women should be integrated into previously all-male structures, and gender-segregated solutions should at best be transitional.

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IMPROVE DATA COLLECTION

In discussions concerning gender-related policies, the extent to which anecdotes, suppositions, and vaguely anthropological personal theories rule the day can often be quite astonishing. Clearly these are not the foundations upon which a policy that directly affects half a population and impacts the society's overall chances to develop should rest. Instead, such policies should be informed by facts. Therefore, the United States

and other international actors must work to improve their data collection and assessment strategies for measuring women's baseline situation and for gauging the effectiveness of programs in post-conflict interventions.

Data on the social well-being of women in the world are collected by several leading international organizations, including United Nations agencies and the World Bank. Unfortunately, data are often hard to collect in conflict zones, making it difficult to establish baseline assessments for policy development and subsequent analysis of progress in post-conflict reconstruction efforts. In Afghanistan, it is nearly impossible for organizations to collect data on simple, internationally recognized measures, let alone data on the sophisticated social indices developed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Oxfam, and the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF). Just as local and international NGOs need the protection of intervention forces to collect the data, intervention forces need data to gauge their own effectiveness. Only through such "analysis and coordination will policy makers overcome the obstacles that have historically impeded engagement."¹⁰ This lesson is particularly salient in Afghanistan, where imposed power structures are often out of touch with people on the ground. Collaboration on data collection should be attainable, as it is in the interest of all actors.

In states undergoing post-conflict reconstruction, monitoring should be performed in three phases. First, reconstruction efforts should focus on opening basic public services and measuring access with regard to all the critical criteria in play (rural/urban, ethnicity, gender, etc.). The next effort, closely following the first, should concentrate on bringing in and supporting existing international data-collection organizations such as UNESCO, UNDP, and the World Bank, among others. Finally, the reconstruction team must work with the national government, international organizations, and NGOs to develop an indigenous data-collection approach for measuring outcomes across sectors.

Thus, data collection on areas of social well-being, using the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) as a baseline, can begin. Using one or two indicators for each area would make it easier to focus limited resources and staff. Resources should be allocated early to help ministries organize and train for data collection. Finally, the international reconstruction team should work with the national government, international organizations, and local and international NGOs to develop a data-collection approach to measure outcomes in all sectors. This could include training and support for more advanced data-collection techniques, such as devel-

oping and improving the national Education Management Information System (EMIS), which is used by most national education ministries and passes education data on to UNESCO for the compilation of international datasets.¹¹

The use of the MDGs as a baseline could establish a standard set of measures to follow progress in all post-conflict reconstruction efforts. They constitute a more manageable data-collection and measurement endeavor than is otherwise available. The MDGs are especially salient when examining the sectors of health and education reform for women, as the priority of these goals is both articulated and quantified. Another benefit could be to create incentives for cross-coordination of planning and resources among international organizations toward the same goals. International groups could also assist by standardizing the known resources available to women in post-conflict situations, especially in local contexts. A collective and inclusive database could be used to categorize relevant information, such as locations of international emergency personnel and vital resources. This information could be quickly accessed during an emergency situation, linking local groups via mechanisms of international oversight.

In economic terms, establishing meaningful data-collection mechanisms for Afghanistan will take a certain amount of creativity, because traditional calculations have continually failed to take into account the contribution women make to the Afghan economy. Much of women's economic contribution has not been monetized, and the work of women has been greatly underreported. To some extent, comparative figures from elsewhere could be used to assign monetary values to non-monetized work. Nation-building experts must seek out alternative data-gathering methodologies for the more conventional pay-based calculations in order to permit an assessment of how women's economic roles are changing,

Nation-building experts must seek out alternative data-gathering methodologies for the more conventional pay-based calculations in order to permit an assessment of how women's economic roles are changing, especially when paired with labor-based estimates.

especially when paired with labor-based estimates. This process should include output measures that assess not only immediate impact (money provided), but also second- and third-order effects (standards of living), which can be useful in determining whether programs are effective. This is particularly true if the measures are coupled with beneficiary interview

research that asks whether or not programs contributed to improved living standards. Additionally, programs that provide equipment should be monitored on a regular basis to see whether and how the equipment is being used, by whom, and whether it contributes to the robustness of women's and households' livelihoods and the standard of living.

Data collection is also necessary from a security standpoint. Especially pressing are data measuring violence against women, which must include violence within the family. This information should be collected, institutionalized, and made publicly available. It should cover such issues as the causes of violence against women, including social attitudes, customs, and practices. It should look into the effects of such violence, the effectiveness of measures to counter violence, and the social attitudes underlying violence. This research could be done by an international organization such as the UN or by one of several NGOs in Afghanistan.

ADDRESS CONTRADICTIONS

The process of nation-building is bound to create contradictions between preexisting and newly created social systems. Even in highly developed societies, innovative social systems can create volatile situations. Social change has an impact on highly emotive, power-based relations between state actors, and it requires continual reassessment of the values of all parties.

An example of the contradictions created by social change is the disconnect occurring in Afghanistan between Islamic law and the promotion of international human rights. Afghanistan's constitution promoted deference to the Qu'ran on all issues while also pronouncing respect for international human rights and international conventions. The actual rules regarding the relationships between women and men remained unclear, and a host of regional and tribal traditions continue to hold sway, often in flagrant contradiction to both of the codes enshrined in the constitution: Islamic precepts *and* human rights. For example, the goal of creating better legal protection for all citizens was addressed in Article 31 of the Afghan Constitution, which decreed the state as "obligated to appoint an attorney for the destitute." In practice, however, there are not nearly enough state attorneys, nor do most women know that they have the right to be provided with an attorney. Thus, many women are most likely to go unrepresented and with little knowledge of their personal legal rights.

An overhaul of existing laws could create the legal framework necessary to overcome this contradiction, while a public education campaign

is essential to inform the Afghan people about the true precepts of Islam and the values of human rights, as well as the societal benefits of respecting them. There is a vast contradiction between the principles as they are written (in the constitution and in the existing legal code) and as they are practiced. Reformers must address that contradiction and create long-term plans to engage the Afghan population in regarding women as citizens. Indigenous NGOs must also work to keep the international community engaged. The ability to connect with resource networks will be crucial.

CONCLUSION

These recommendations have a common emphasis on creating and sustaining local support. The top-down transfer of reform efforts initiated from above or from outside has historically been the weak point in repeated efforts to modernize Afghanistan. Fostering local, community-based support for women's programs and extending that support into the provinces and to the lower strata of society are essential. As foreign actors develop relationships with communities and garner support from local leaders, the inclusion of women in policy programming will become more feasible. Until renewed security issues intervened, acceptance of key components of gender equity was high in Afghanistan at the grassroots level. Schools for girls were not only tolerated but in many cases were actively demanded by local populations; women participated eagerly in the national elections, and men did not appear to have any objections to these changes. A national development program in which female participation was a key requirement was implemented successfully.

Conversely, the caution shown by international actors has not translated into greater stability. Many Western policymakers cited the Soviet example as an object lesson: because they had proceeded too forcefully with women's emancipation, the theory went, an enraged populace rose up against them. This once again underscores the need for fact-based planning and decision making. The above hypothesis is almost entirely speculative. Was it in fact true that the Afghan resistance was mobilized largely, or even partly, by a desire to prevent gender equality? What aspects or manifestations of gender equality raised objections? Even if the Afghan resistance was motivated by limiting gender equality, was there a good reason to believe that the Afghan population held the same attitudes after the fall of the Taliban as it did before the Soviet occupation? Was there good reason to believe that it viewed the U.S.-led coalition in the same way that

it had regarded the Soviets? These were all just guesses, and one should not disadvantage half a population on the basis of a guess.

Six years into the nation-building and reconstruction effort, we can at least determine the opposite correlation: moving only with the utmost caution on the matter of gender does not bring about stability. The Taliban are back, but not because a groundswell of traditionalist resistance to forced social innovations has summoned them. And where vacillating support for the Afghan government is allowing them a foothold, the reason for that vacillation is that the new order is seen as moving too slowly, having no muscle, and not delivering on its promise of advancement and modernity. A strong case could be made today for the argument that a bolder reform effort, including gender mainstreaming, would have enhanced and not endangered the stabilization mission. ■

ENDNOTES

- 1 Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, trans., (New York: Penguin, 1993), 1.
- 2 Mary Caprioli, "Gender Equality and State Aggression: The Impact of Domestic Gender Equality on State First Use of Force," *International Interactions* 29 (2003): 195–214.
- 3 For many years, feminist authors argued that stronger participation of women in politics would lead to greater peace, because women were more peaceful. It is probably more likely that such societies are more peaceable for another reason, namely, because their problem-solving conduct is more egalitarian and therefore they also approach their domestic and international disputes in a more cooperative manner. For more on this see: David Carment, Soulema El Achkar, Steward Prest, and Yigadeesen Samy, "The 2006 Country Indicators for Foreign Policy: Opportunities and Challenges for Canada," *Canadian Foreign Policy* 13 (1) (2006); and Cheryl Benard, Kristen Cordell, Olga Oliker, "Women and Human Security: the Case of Post-Conflict Afghanistan," *WIIS Words* (Summer 2007).
- 4 David Dollar and Raymond Fisman, "Are Women Really the 'Fairer Sex'? Corruption and Women in Government," World Bank, Policy Research Report on Gender and Development, Working Paper Series No. 4, 1999.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 To read this study in its entirety see: Cheryl Benard, Seth Jones, Olga Oliker, Cathryn Thurston, Brooke Stearns, Kristen Cordell, *Women and Nation Building* (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 2008), forthcoming. To receive a copy of the full report upon publication, please e-mail your request to KCORDELL@RAND.ORG.
- 8 "Governance and Women," Chapter 4, in Benard, Jones, Oliker, Thurston, Stearns, and Cordell.

- 9 In Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other Muslim countries in the region, customs of strict gender segregation have opened professional opportunities for women—for example, in banking, where separate branches of banks cater to female clients and are staffed by women. To our knowledge, the economic consequences of duplicate institutions of this kind have not been systematically examined.
- 10 Carment et al., 2006. For more on the data, see the Country Indicators for Foreign Policy Project, Carleton University, <<http://www.carleton.ca/cifp/about.htm>> (accessed October 25, 2007).
- 11 In a just-completed project, a team of RAND researchers studied the issue of gender as it relates to post-conflict stabilization and nation-building. We first reviewed the broader literature on these subjects and then conducted a case study of post-Taliban Afghanistan. See Elaine Unterhalter, “Fragmented Frameworks?: Researching Women, Gender, Education, and Development,” *Beyond Access: Transforming Policy and Practice for Gender Equality in Education* (Oxford: Oxfam Publishing, 2005).