BRIEFING PAPER

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A Place at the Table: Afghan Women, Men and Decision-making Authority

Gender Challenges

This briefing paper challenges development practitioners to reflect on their assumptions about what constitutes gender issues in Afghanistan, and to identify opportunities for gender-sensitive programming, policy formation and indicators of success.

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Overview

Unquestionably, the situation of Afghan women has been one of the most prominent areas of rhetorical focus of the international development community in the post-Taliban era. After years of conflict and forcible exclusion from the public sphere, women have been gradually emerging as a social, political and economic force. Representatives of government, donors and the international aid community have been quick to note the progress made around women's rights since late 2001.

Some of the most widely recognised achievements have been in the legal and policy arenas. The Afghan government has removed severe discriminatory laws against women; ratified a constitution that promotes non-discrimination; and facilitated women's unprecedented participation in national elections through civic education, voting and candidacy. Dr Masooda Jalal, Minister of Women's Affairs, recently attended the ten-year anniversary review of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) and is currently drafting a National Action Plan for Afghan women that addresses the twelve critical areas of concern of the BPfA.

Achievements are being made at the local level as well, in part because of the growing focus within the government and among donors on providing aid assistance directly to communities. For the first time throughout the country, women and young people – among other groups not traditionally consulted on community issues – are being included in forums to determine village and neighbourhood development priorities, and to design and implement projects to address them. The increased presence and visibility of women, in particular through the National Solidarity Programme (NSP),[1] has been considered a positive step towards the greater participation of Afghans in their own development process – a principle supported in the new constitution.

However, it is important to examine whether these developments actually herald the significant change and progress for women that has been touted. Given the millions of dollars that have been earmarked for gender programming in Afghanistan, it is crucial that development actors, donors and the government agree on what constitutes progress, and how it should be measured. Part of this process will involve a better understanding of the context of gender dynamics in Afghanistan and how to effect social change. Moreover, development actors need to arrive at a consensus on

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[1] The NSP is a country-wide initiative led by the Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD) that provides block grants to communities to enable them to plan, prioritise, implement and finance their own development projects.

the objectives and terminology used around gender: the government, donors and NGOs may include concepts of gender equality, equity and mainstreaming in their work – but they may not have a common definition of what those mean in the Afghan context.

This briefing paper challenges policymakers and programme designers to reflect on their assumptions about what constitutes gender issues in the Afghan context, and to identify opportunities for improving gender-sensitive programming, policy formulation and indicators of success. Using AREU's research into gender and local-level decision-making[2] as a background, this paper suggests that at the local level, action should be taken to:

Given the millions of dollars that have been earmarked for gender programming in Afghanistan, it is crucial that development actors, donors and the government agree on what constitutes progress in gender equity, and how it should be measured.

- **Promote understanding of gender issues in the Afghan context among female and male staff of NGOs and UN agencies.** Agencies working to promote gender equity at the local level can only be successful if their staff subscribe to those notions themselves. Internal assessments of staff understanding of gender concepts, coupled with longer-term training and experience-based learning can encourage local staff to create linkages to gender concepts and goals, while drawing out important lessons in the process.
- **Increase engagement with local women and men for more specific identification of gender issues in the Afghan context.** Policymakers and donors should place well-qualified, gender-dedicated staff in the Ministries of Women's Affairs, Rural Rehabilitation and Development, Public Health and Education, and other relevant regional and provincial offices. Responsibilities would include providing support to local staff to help them identify and act upon hindrances to, and opportunities for, addressing programme goals on gender. This requires more regular interaction between local staff and women and men in communities.

On a more broad-based, conceptual level, the following actions should be taken:

- **Review sector-specific strategies and benchmarks on gender equity against what happens in practice, and identify gaps and areas of coherence.** This could be accomplished by undertaking a coordinated exercise to compare and contrast gender objectives across relevant donors, ministries and UN agencies, and by dedicating time and resources for monitoring and evaluation of programmes and projects. The existing Advisory Group on gender could be a useful mechanism for putting this forward and ensuring greater transparency between gender actors.
- **Allocate resources to the design and funding of long-term projects.** This could include combining programme design and funding with non-gender-specific initiatives to capitalise on resources already being spent, and ensuring that these programmes do not hinder progress on gender equity in the longer term.

[2] In early 2004, AREU launched a research project that aimed to generate a better understanding among NGOs, the UN, donors and the Afghan government about how decisions are made on priority household and community issues, and how men and women participate in decision-making. This paper draws upon this research, as well as complementary work by AREU that examined gendered participation in the NSP.

I. Gender Equality, Equity and Mainstreaming

Including gender as a category of analysis and action in development programming is a way to address one of the most prominent forms of discrimination and exclusion. Women have in the past been marginalised from the benefits of aid assistance, but it is now widely understood that the different life experiences of men and women must be taken into account. Promoting rights, equality of opportunity and access to resources for both women and men is considered by most donors, NGOs and UN agencies to be good development practice.

Nevertheless, there is no single strategy for how to include gender in development programming. In Afghanistan, as elsewhere, approaches for addressing gender inequality generally fall into those which specifically promote women's rights, and those which promote women's participation in development to encourage economic growth and poverty reduction.[3] Both recognise that gender is an area that should be considered along other factors (e.g. age, class, ethnicity) and included in all aspects of all sectors of development programming.

In the international context, gender mainstreaming has been widely adopted as a strategy to bring gender into the centre of development policy and practice. This means including gender in all aspects of policy and programming (i.e. needs analysis, formulation, monitoring and evaluation, staff recruitment, budgeting). It is a strategy that has been accepted by the World Bank among other large donors, and is reflected in many of Afghanistan's country strategy documents and aid mechanisms. However, it needs to be understood as a process "rather than a goal of 'doing gender' once and for all, because gender roles and relations continuously change."[4] As understanding of these realities deepen, so should the specific ways in which gender mainstreaming is implemented.

There is a range of approaches development professionals use to achieve gender equality and equity in their programmes, including:

- Promoting policy and institutional change;
- Increasing attention to gender disparities;
- Increasing support to women's networks and organisations; and
- Including men as partners and allies in gender programming.[5]

One challenge to a coherent approach to gender equality in Afghanistan has been the lack of understanding of local-level realities and gender relations. AREU's research on gender and local-level decision-making sought to provide different examples of gender relations, and to show how these can impact on women's and men's participation in development initiatives. This is one attempt at undertaking the kind of gender analysis that is at the heart of good development planning.

Still, many question what relevance these concepts and approaches have in the Afghan context. In a country where it is commonly accepted that the needs and interests of a family take precedence over those of the individuals within it, it is often stated by community leaders, husbands and fathers that women have no interests of their own – or that women's interests are the same as theirs. Indeed, a common sentiment expressed by village men in AREU's research into gender and local-level decision-

Common Gender Development Terms

Gender discrimination: the systematic denial of individual rights, opportunities and access to resources based on gender

Gender equality: women and men having the same opportunities in life, including the ability to participate in public life

Gender equity: the equivalence in life outcomes for men and women; gender equity recognises that a redistribution of power and resources is required, as well as recognition of women's and men's different needs and interests

Gender mainstreaming: an organisational strategy that aims to bring gender into all aspects of an institution's policy and activities, through building gender capacity and accountability

Adapted from Reeves and Baden, *Gender and Development: Concepts and Definitions*, 2000.

[3] World Bank, 2001, *Engendering Development through Gender Equality in Rights, Resources and Voice*, World Bank Policy Research Report, Washington DC: Oxford University Press.

[4] Sippi Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, April 2002, *Report of the EC RRM Assessment Mission to Afghanistan, Gender Guidelines*, Kabul: EC.

[5] OECD, 1998, *DAC Sourcebook on Concepts and Approaches Linked to Gender Equality*, Paris: OECD.

making was that "women don't have any problems".

Given this reality, how can development practitioners and others begin to introduce initiatives that promote rights, and more equal opportunities and access to resources between, as well as among, men and women? The next sections examine some of the tactics employed at the national and community levels, and the often inadequate measures that have been used to ascertain their success in enabling more women to make decisions and shape development activities.

II. Contextualising Women as Decision-makers

Putting in place the right kinds of mechanisms and processes to enable women's participation in development is not a sufficient prerequisite for ensuring their substantive input into the identification and prioritisation of needs and interests. Understanding of local contexts and development of context-specific indicators also are needed to understand what is really being achieved for and by Afghan women and their communities.

Too often, the symbolic participation of women in public institutions is seen as a measure of success. Tangible indicators such as the creation of physical space for women or the numbers of women present at public activities are used to demonstrate the achievement of gender equality. In the Afghan context, it is fair to say that these developments signal some forms of change, but identifying which forms of change are occurring is important. Women may be present at the table, but is this where decisions are made? Do those in the room have any authority to challenge decisions made if they do not agree with them?

It has been argued that true participation is not based on nominal inclusion of women in institutions, but on how transformative those institutions are in empowering individuals to take decisions and act for themselves. Participatory development initiatives are most valuable when they are able to move men and women "from merely being told, from being asked, [to] being brought into decision-making processes and being able to determine the shape that action takes."[6]

Local-level institutions: old and new

Much of the focus of gender programming in Afghanistan has concentrated on support for local-level institutions as a way of reaching women "where they are at". The primary institutions at the local level vary from place to place, but in the Afghan context they generally include the household[7] or family, and at the community level, the *shura* (local council). These institutions uphold the rules, norms, behaviours and practices that persist over time and serve collectively valued purposes. Over the last decade, newer organisations also have been established by NGOs and UN agencies, though their longer-term role in establishing new local rules and norms – or in transforming existing ones – remains to be seen.

At the community[8] level people generally recognise the *shura* as the most important institution, largely because it has traditionally been the only institution around which people mobilise. The *shura* is an informal body for decision-making and dispute resolution on a range of economic, political and sometimes social issues. Like most traditional Afghan institutions, it is usually comprised of male elders and landowners. Reflecting women's consistent exclusion from direct representation and leadership roles, men are responsible for upholding the collective values of the "community". In recent years, some *shuras* have taken on different roles, and some have been abused by those who use the institutions for personal, economic and political gain at the expense of local populations. Yet the *shura* appears to remain influential in decision-making about issues that affect the welfare of local populations.

Since the early 1990s, many development agencies have been involved in forming new community "institutions" that build on the *shura* model, in the belief that they can be adjusted to encourage more democratic and participatory community development. In urban areas, UN-Habitat launched Community Fora as the primary mechanism for development, while in rural areas, these structures have taken the form of NGO-established Village Organisations (VOs). These have been followed more recently by the creation of Community Development Councils (CDCs)

[6] Andrea Cornwall, 2000, *Making a Difference? Gender and Participatory Development*, IDS Discussion Paper No. 378, Sussex: IDS.

[7] AREU defines "household" in this context as the unit comprised of those who eat from the same cooking pot. The actual composition does differ among the regions of Afghanistan, at times making it difficult to compare and contrast household realities.

[8] There is some debate over what constitutes "community". In the Afghan context, community most widely refers to villages and neighborhoods, but these units often do not represent sites of shared identity and interests, and they tend to obscure the needs and interests of those without a public voice, such as women.

within the NSP. These institutions are intended to provide local access to financial and human resources (such as block grants, technical assistance) and basic services (water, roads, schools). Community Fora are notable for their early focus on women as a target group for community development initiatives, and NSP "women's CDCs" also set aside 10 percent of funds for their own projects.

But are these newer institutions any more inclusive for formerly marginalised groups, or any more effective at delivering assistance than the age-old *shuras*? Some evidence suggests that there may not be much difference between recently established community institutions and the *shuras* or similar traditional institutions. Research conducted by AREU in rural villages in Samangan Province, for instance, revealed that the NGO-established VO and the traditional *shura* were markedly similar, both in terms of local power dynamics as well as notions of what benefits the VO could bring to the community. This situation suggests that there may not be much interest locally in changing the existing power dynamics to correspond with principles of participation and equity outlined in the NGO's mandate.[9]

This is not to suggest that all newer local-level institutions are seen by communities as "just another *shura*". AREU research into the perceptions of CDCs illustrated that many community members in villages where the NSP has been implemented perceive CDCs as more credible than *shuras* because they participate in their direct elections, and these councils are registered and authorised by the government. While CARE and BRAC, local partners in implementing NSP across several provinces, have stated that in some areas, many elected CDC members are local elites,[10] ongoing AREU research indicates that interference in CDC affairs by local power-holders appears to be decreasing gradually over time.

Continuing marginalisation

Ongoing dominance of local-level institutions by traditional power holders have many implications for development practitioners, including those working on gender issues. Traditionally *Shuras* are built on social inequalities, most of which hinder the participation of community members, particularly women. As a result, many community members are marginalised and do not have an effective voice in determining the issues for consideration or the outcomes of *shura* decisions.

While the newer local-level institutions established by development organisations are designed to be more inclusive of underrepresented groups, increasing the numbers of these people on the councils does not necessarily ensure their substantive participation. On the surface, women and men may be welcomed and respected, but they may have limited influence. For example, the Community Fora established in Mazar-i-Sharif by UN-Habitat actively encourage men and women as *gozar* (neighbourhood) representatives to express the interests and needs of their local constituencies. However, none of the neighbourhood residents who responded to AREU's interviews "reported being involved in defining the needs of their *gozars*, deciding which projects to engage in, benefiting from those decisions or knowing where the aid had gone."[11]

A similar finding emerged when examining the CDCs formed under the NSP, which were designed to promote greater inclusion of women, both in their elections and actual membership. However, in 30 communities studied by AREU, only three women participated as full members of a joint male–female CDC. In other communities, even if women were officially elected to the CDC, they were not permitted to attend mixed gender meetings and discussions. In these instances, a separate "women's *shura*" was sometimes formed, though communication between the women's *shura* and the male-led CDC was often uncoordinated or non-existent.[12] In essence, these findings indicate that in attempting to fulfil the "letter of the law" of NSP programming, the foundation of inclusiveness upon which the programme was built has been disregarded.[13]

False measures of success

While the NSP community councils and other newer community institutions are meant to be participatory, the government and implementing NGOs must recognise that a participatory approach does not necessarily ensure gender sensitivity. Indeed, "while participatory development initiatives tend to question and address the power relations behind any simplistic idea of 'community', they have been less successful in understanding and tackling gender power relations."[14] The Afghanistan experience certainly bears this out.

The physical presence of women in local-level institutions is a false measure of achievement of

[9] Shawna Wakefield, 2005, *Gender and Local Level Decision Making: Findings from a Case Study in Samangan*, Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit.
[10] Inger W. Boesen, 2004, *From Subjects to Citizens: Local Participation in the National Solidarity Programme*, Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit.
[11] Shawna Wakefield, 2004, *Gender and Local Level Decision Making: Finding from a Case Study in Mazar e Sharif*, Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit.
[12] Boesen, 2004.
[13] This is not to suggest, however, that women's *shuras* are not without their advantages. They do provide the opportunity for women to discuss their issues and find means of mutual support where previously they might not have had such a forum.
[14] Reeves and Baden, 2000, p. 6.

gender goals. For their part, the staff of organisations helping to implement these institutions may communicate the need for women to be present, but may not have the time, money or will to follow up and ensure that their initiatives are enabling women's perspectives to emerge and be heard. They might also lack awareness of women's rights themselves or knowledge of how to facilitate dialogue among rural, illiterate populations. Often NGOs seek the creation of physical space for women's participation, but focus less on facilitating dialogue among different types of women and men (separately or together) on which kinds of issues they want to see put on the development agenda. This is not to place undue blame on NGOs – indeed, facilitating such dialogue can be an extremely contentious issue that goes against the grain of a community's social structure. In these cases, it is unlikely that local power holders will give concessions to NGOs trying to work in communities.

Not surprisingly (and as evidenced in similar contexts), there are some meeting places where women carry out their own decision-making related to their roles and responsibilities for community level functions. These differ from area to area – and even neighbourhood to neighbourhood – and women are more likely to meet around social community functions, than those more obviously related to development. These situations (water and wood collection, rug weaving, weddings, funerals, religious ceremonies) provide women opportunities to share information on issues that affect them as well as the welfare of the community. The extent to which these gatherings may be capitalised upon and used to influence decision-making is an issue that needs to be explored further.

III. Working with Communities

Building on existing *shuras* is a practical strategy for gaining legitimate engagement with a community. At the same time it enables NGOs to capitalise on a "known entity" whose composition and operations are widely understood.

The influence development actors have in encouraging participation is at least partly dependent on what benefits the decision-makers in a given community believe they will get in exchange. There may be an inherent tension between the objectives of NGOs and the communities they work in: while the former consider how far they can push local values and beliefs to encourage women's participation, the latter consider ways to adapt NGO requirements to fit local gender norms.

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One of the ways in which this tension plays out is through the "language of development". While some communities may present an outward appearance of collaboration, closer examination of the dynamics within local-level institutions often reveals that "women understand their place in the social hierarchy well enough not to raise their concerns and agree with men. Village leaders, male family heads, etc. often instruct key vocal women from their community to bring up particular issues in meetings organised by 'outsiders'."[15] Many communities with exposure to development programmes and their operations have learned to "talk the talk" and say what programmers want to hear, but do not subscribe to notions of gender equity. This was particularly notable in AREU's research in Samangan, where villagers frequently used terms such as "democracy" and "rights" when chatting with outsiders, but demonstrated confusion and lack of will about applying these concepts to the participation of women.[16]

As a result, some leaders are willing to voice support for women's greater involvement and may permit meetings between female NGO staff and the women, or even joint meetings between men and women. However, they may not believe in the underlying values of promoting women's participation themselves. They are informed enough to know that the presence of outsiders is likely to be temporary, and that the appearance of including women attracts aid.

Knowledge and leadership

Another significant challenge to engaging with communities relates to the commonly held notion that women's knowledge is "incomplete".

[15] Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, 2002.

[16] This problem also is sometimes observed amongst personnel of international agencies, donors, the UN and NGOs, who likewise may realise that gender equity is a goal, but not understand or subscribe to it themselves.

While people acknowledge that women may know how to manage certain household decisions, men and women alike often state that women's knowledge is irrelevant to development activities. In Panjao, for instance, men in one community told researchers that they were free to talk with the women, but warned them that "women do not know anything". Women themselves also repeated this statement, saying that they lack enough knowledge to make decisions. This sentiment can be unwittingly reinforced by local NGO staff, who may also assume that women do not have enough knowledge to participate, and may be unaware of the channels women do have for accessing and sharing information about the wider community. Formal education, training and literacy programmes can help to break this barrier – as has been demonstrated in Herat, where programmes provided through NSP have alleviated some negative self-perceptions of women's knowledge. But obtaining an education also poses challenges. In Samangan, for example, villagers were quick to tell outsiders their aspirations for educating boys and girls alike. In reality, however, girls' schools were not given priority, and the ongoing physical and intellectual exclusion of women from development processes in these areas indicated that villagers were well versed in telling outsiders what they perceived were "correct" priorities for use of development funds.

The undervaluation of women's knowledge impacts on women's ability to participate in community decisions, as well as to take on leadership roles. Possessing knowledge is associated with qualities of good leadership, though the most important qualities for both men and women were honesty, fairness and trustworthiness. Nevertheless, the criteria for leadership in local institutions appear to be changing in some places, particularly in urban areas, but also in rural areas. All of AREU's case studies found that current leadership requirements include some levels of education as well as good communication skills. The latter now includes the ability to speak with NGO staff in addition to the traditional requirements.

Another important traditional requirement of leaders is their ability to provide resources to local people – be they material, work, financial, or security. Thus, even if marginalised community members do gain a "voice" in community affairs, there may be little incentive for those with limited resources – and as a result, power and authority – to change the way that community decisions are made.

In AREU's research, both men and women were often sceptical about whether women can be leaders. Nevertheless, in urban areas in particular, residents have clear ideas about the distinction of criteria for women's versus men's leadership. Women leaders should be educated, and help their community and their families at the same time. In the rural areas NGO staff and community members pragmatically noted that women also need to have some freedom of mobility, in order to be able to visit and mobilise other women.

Forming Women's Groups

NGOs and others doing local-level programming are often keen to form separate women's groups to bring women together and offer them some measure of autonomy and control over local-level decision-making. But groups are not always easy to form – indeed, one mistake common to development programming in Afghanistan in the past has been the formulation of groups based on geography rather than where existing social bonds and networks are strongest.

Some of the key questions that must be considered before forming these "coalitions" of women should be:

- Do women have a strong incentive to participate in the group activity, especially if it is not something they do not do naturally on a large and formal scale?
- Are women mobile and able to come to the group? How far are they permitted to travel?
- How much time is involved? Is there childcare and other support systems for those who have significant time constraints?

Adapted from Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, 2002

Because of differences between the roles and responsibilities of men and women, and the related values placed on them, women leaders may be more harshly scrutinised if their actions are not perceived to benefit their community and their families simultaneously.

Men – and women – as barriers

Despite the rhetoric that women have limited knowledge, men understand that women will sometimes share information they have between them. In doing this, they may divulge information that can be seen as detrimental to the family image and standing within a community, and this can lead to suspicion of women's participation in new community institutions, if these same men are also not clear about what outsiders are trying to achieve in their community. If men believe that women's participation in activities outside of their widely accepted household and community responsibilities will not benefit them, they are more likely to prevent it. Shame also plays a strong role; because women are not

supposed to be seen negotiating with men, and strong, public women can bring about negative perceptions of a family, men may be even more reluctant to allow women's participation.

While men enjoy an amount of power and control over their female relatives, they themselves can be marginalised from active participation in community-level decision-making. They may make inferences from their own participation (or lack thereof) in such activities, and decide that if they are not seeing any benefits there is even less likelihood that women's participation will make a positive difference. Conversely, if they believe that women's participation is going to increase their status and be a source of pride for the family, participation may be encouraged.

There is an assumption that men hold significant responsibility in prohibiting women's participation, but this assumption neglects another important phenomenon – the role women themselves play in socially controlling other women. A study of 30 NSP communities found that it was common for older women to prohibit younger women from accessing information about NSP and participating in the programme, even if that participation was limited to voting in CDC elections. Similarly, in research on local-level decision-making in Samangan, rural women frequently reported that it is socially unacceptable for newly married women to appear outside of the home until they had several children and were "established" homemakers.

Promoting women's rights and gender equality in the context of such cultural norms has been an ongoing challenge. There is significant hesitation among development practitioners and policymakers to push these social and cultural boundaries. This is understandable given the backlash that has come of some efforts in the past and at present, particularly in rural and more conservative areas. Yet, the extent to which this caution is built on assumptions about what will and will not be allowed within individual communities – and what women and men want – needs to be questioned.

IV. Ways Forward

So what do these ongoing challenges mean to development actors working on gender in Afghanistan?

There are several ways in which policymakers, donors, NGOs and others can strengthen women's participation in the development process from the micro to the macro level. Many of these require striking a balance between demonstrating short-term, immediate impact and forging ahead with long-term strategies. The long-standing lack of access to vital basic resources and infrastructure throughout Afghanistan, along with the remaining need for humanitarian work in a "post-conflict" environment, means that there is still much short-term work to be done, but this should not detract from longer-term visions of social change.

At the local level, NGOs, UN agencies and Afghan provincial government offices can **work to promote understanding of gender equity in the Afghan context among female and male staff.** This can be accomplished by:

- Carrying out internal assessments of staff attitudes and understanding of gender concepts. This could provide a basis for supporting staff to identify linkages between gender concepts and the range of programmes they are working on, and motivating them to promote gender equity in their work.
- Ensuring that staff hiring practices, policies and procedures and other guidelines take into account gendered needs and that all staff be trained about gender prior to joining their organisation or ministry.
- Hiring male and female staff who show willingness to understand and support the goals of the organisation and programmes they will be working for – and creating incentives for staff who best promote appropriate values in their work with communities.
- Providing longer-term training and experiential learning opportunities for staff that enable them to create linkages to gender concepts and goals, while drawing out internal best practices in the process. Training and mentoring are particularly important for government ministry officials as well, and should include training in data collection and analysis of gender equity in programmes and policies.
- Including group facilitation and conflict resolution methodologies in training. This should strengthen staff ability to promote enabling environments for recognition of women's and men's

knowledge, sources of difference and discrimination, and to negotiate more equitable strategies for local development.

A related approach that can be taken by policymakers and donors to **increase engagement with local women and men for more specific identification of gender issues in the Afghan context is:**

- Placing well-qualified, gender-dedicated staff in the Department of Women's Affairs, the Ministries of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, Public Health and Education and other relevant offices to consult with local staff on hindrances to and opportunities for addressing programme goals on gender equity.
- Facilitating critical thinking among district-level and head office staff to enable them to identify gender issues and develop strategies with local female and male staff, and to address them in local contexts.
- Working with district staff to develop context-specific indicators on gender objectives, and usable tools to enable regular monitoring.

Likewise, policymakers and donors should be tasked with **reviewing sector-specific strategies and benchmarks on gender equity against what happens in practice and identifying gaps and areas of coherence.** This could be accomplished by:

- Undertaking a coordinated exercise between relevant donors, UN agencies and ministries to compare and contrast related objectives, and how they are being put into practice. While this is a monumental task, one starting point would be to engage the Advisory Group on gender to initiate this process and encourage greater transparency between gender actors.
- Dedicating time and resources for monitoring and evaluation of proposed, actual and planned programmes and projects. These should be jointly carried out by teams that have expertise in gender, the appropriate sectors, local contexts and language skills.
- Providing more publicity around success stories, and where relevant, training and capacity-building to ensure their replication.

Finally, development actors must **dedicate resources to the design and funding of long-term projects that take into account gender mainstreaming.** Specifically, this might mean:

- Coordinating programme design and funding with non-gender specific longer-term initiatives to capitalise on resources already being spent, and to ensure they do not hinder progress on gender equality in the longer term.
- Encouraging involvement from local field staff (i.e. villages, neighbourhoods) to ensure their knowledge on the context within which they are working are taken into account.

About the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) is an independent research organisation that conducts and facilitates action-oriented research and learning that informs and influences policy and practice. AREU also actively promotes a culture of research and learning by strengthening analytical capacity in Afghanistan and by creating opportunities for analysis, thought and debate. Fundamental to AREU's vision is that its work should improve Afghan lives. AREU was established by the assistance community working in Afghanistan and has a board of directors with representation from donors, UN and multilateral agencies and non-governmental organisations.

Current funding for AREU is provided by the European Commission (EC), United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), UK Department for International Development (DFID), World Bank, Stichting Vluchteling, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the governments of Sweden, Switzerland and Denmark.

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