

# Chapter 16

## The role of Afghan women

16.1 The committee has considered the central role that civil society could have as partners with the government in helping it build capacity and in delivering basic services. In this context, a number of witnesses underscored the need to recognise the role of women in capacity building. The following chapter looks at the role of Afghan women in the reconstruction and recovery of their country.

### Status of women in Afghanistan

16.2 Afghanistan has a legal and policy framework that provides for the protection and advancement of women. The Constitution recognises that the citizens of Afghanistan—whether male or female—have equal rights and duties before the law.<sup>1</sup> Afghanistan is also a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW); it has established a National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA); and passed the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) law, which criminalised rape in 2009.

16.3 Despite these measures, international organisations involved in development assistance have, for many years, raised concerns about discrimination against women and girls in Afghanistan evident in female attendance at school, their low literacy rate and domestic violence against women.

16.4 According to a report by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, Afghanistan is 'one of the worst places in the world regarding gender equality'.<sup>2</sup> Women face inequalities and even discriminations in many spheres of social life, such as education, control over resources, access to economic opportunities and justice and, political participation. They face deprivations relating to their right to own and control property, especially owning cash.<sup>3</sup> Due to traditional practices that isolate them, women have very limited access to social, legal, medical, or economic protection care or advice.<sup>4</sup>

16.5 Mr Krishnan informed the committee of a 2011 ActionAid survey conducted across six provinces in Afghanistan showing that nine out of 10 women are afraid of what is going to happen regarding their future. He maintained that if the status of

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- 1 The Constitution of Afghanistan, Year 1382, Chapter Two, Fundamental Rights and Duties of Citizens, Article Twenty-two, [http://www.afghan-web.com/politics/current\\_constitution.html](http://www.afghan-web.com/politics/current_constitution.html)
  - 2 Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, *Fifth Report: Situation of Economic and Social Rights in Afghanistan*, November/December 2011, p. 90.
  - 3 Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, *Fifth Report: Situation of Economic and Social Rights in Afghanistan*, November/December 2011, pp. 91–92.
  - 4 Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, *Fifth Report: Situation of Economic and Social Rights in Afghanistan*, November/December 2011, pp. 91–92. See also survey results on attitudes to women working outside the home, The Asia Foundation, *Afghanistan in 2012, A Survey of the Afghan People*, 2012, p. 163.

women or violence against women is a key indicator for progress, then progress has not been achieved in Afghanistan.<sup>5</sup>

16.6 CARE Australia emphasised the importance of women and girls and their involvement in governance and accountability processes.<sup>6</sup> It was of the view that the donor community was not paying sufficient attention to the roles of civil society, and women and girls particularly, in monitoring and directing the flow of international resources through the Afghanistan government and its aid programs.<sup>7</sup> Mr Leahy noted that in a country such as Afghanistan, where civil society and nation building are of such critical importance, peace building and conflict prevention need to be considered as factors in all programming. The role of communities, and particularly women and girls, needed to be highlighted and protected in those processes.<sup>8</sup>



*Child health checks, Uruzgan Province (image courtesy of AusAID)*

5 *Committee Hansard*, 4 December 2012, p. 55.

6 *Committee Hansard*, 4 December 2012, p. 37, *Submission 15*, pp. 11–12.

7 *Committee Hansard*, 4 December 2012, p. 36.

8 *Committee Hansard*, 4 December 2012, p. 36.

## Australia's aid program and women

16.7 Gender has become a more visible and prominent facet of aid projects.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the Afghanistan's National Development Strategy (ANDS) has nominated gender equality as one of six cross-cutting issues that, if not addressed effectively, could jeopardise the overall success of the strategy.

16.8 Australia has adopted equal access to education opportunities for girls and boys as a key objective of Australia's aid program.<sup>10</sup> The 'Children of Uruzgan' project exemplifies this approach. Also according to Mr Krishnan, Australia was the first donor to announce that it was committing money to end violence against women. He noted that such violence is a primary area of concern, because everyone has been neglecting it for many years, and Australia has 'shown the courage to come out' to support measures to combat violence against women.<sup>11</sup>



*A voter presents her registration card to polling officials.*

*A voter secretly casts her vote—during the 20 August 2009 Afghan Presidential and Provincial Council election.*

*(images courtesy of AusAID)*

9 Scanteam, Analysts and Advisors, *ARTF at a Cross Roads: History and the Future*, Final Report, Oslo, September 2012, p. 2.

10 AusAID, *Annual Report 2010–2011*, p. 29.

11 *Committee Hansard*, 4 December 2012, p. 57.

16.9 Mr Leahy noted that one of CARE's main priorities in its programming is the empowerment of women and girls and the protection of their rights.<sup>12</sup> He referred to the gains made in this area through the work of CARE, with support from the Australian Government and cited community based education and a DIAC-funded program around the status of widows. He noted that a year after the completion of DIAC'S program for livelihoods, 80 per cent of the people CARE had worked with were continuing to derive an income from the skill gained through the project.<sup>13</sup>

16.10 According to Mr Leahy, the programs were focused particularly on protecting the status of girls and women and, in his view, were an area where the Australian Government has made a valuable contribution to the development and stability of Afghanistan and its future success as a society.<sup>14</sup> He raised concern, however, that:

...the new aid management policy that is being developed, post Tokyo, did not have in the first draft any guidance on gender mainstreaming. To be more specific than that, in terms of consultation processes beyond the national level and between ministries and those that happen at lower levels, and the role and access of women and girls and civil society organisations to those processes—that was not clear and we think that needs to be clear, and monitoring the benchmarks around what that aid is trying to do.<sup>15</sup>

16.11 Also in the context of representation, Ms Carol Angir, ActionAID noted that in all discussions about development and transition, the question of where women are in the conversation needs to be asked continually. She stated further that it was not only about female politicians being at the table but about taking deliberate efforts to reach out to women in the community and allowing their voice to be heard.<sup>16</sup> She underscored the importance of ensuring that in numbers women participate in critical political processes in Afghanistan right now, by asking:

Do we have an adequate number of women engaging in all aspects of political decisions in relation to transition, whether we are talking about troops pulling out of Afghanistan, about safety and security, about transitional justice, about livelihood security or about economic policies, and also about development of foreign policies towards Afghanistan?<sup>17</sup>

16.12 Although the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission's recent report recognised the efforts made to eliminate gender inequalities, it argued that the current approach to gender and gender inequality was flawed. It stated that the view in governmental and civil society institutions was quantitative and concerned with

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12 *Committee Hansard*, 4 December 2012, p. 35.

13 *Committee Hansard*, 4 December 2012, p. 39.

14 *Committee Hansard*, 4 December 2012, p. 35.

15 *Committee Hansard*, 4 December 2012, p. 39.

16 *Committee Hansard*, 4 December 2012, p. 57. Ms Angir is the Senior Program Co-ordinator, Addressing Violence Against Women, ActionAid.

17 *Committee Hansard*, 4 December 2012, p. 57.

increasing the presence of women rather than the quality of their contribution. It stated:

Women's qualitative presence can strengthen their capabilities, such as literacy and professionalism, thereby promoting their status in policy- and decision-making processes. The existing quantitative view further weakens women and as a result, they cannot play an effective role in eliminating gender inequalities. This also slows down the process to eliminate gender inequalities in the society.<sup>18</sup>

16.13 Mr Krishnan also underlined the importance of genuine change in behaviour as a measure of success as opposed to surface or shallow improvements. He referred to increased girls' enrolment that did not match the actual attendance at school.<sup>19</sup> Mrs Pilla agreed with the view that there was 'definitely a greater enrolment than there is attendance'.<sup>20</sup> In this regard, Mrs Pilla observed:

One of the reasons often given for women's lack of participation with local and provincial conflict-resolution bodies or mechanisms is that they lack education. Not only does this lack of education impact the way that men think about women but it also contributes to women's own acceptance of the status quo and the lack of their confidence and capacity to participate.<sup>21</sup>

16.14 Based on its field work, ActionAid's analysis and interpretation indicated that one reason for the failure to improve the lives of women in Afghanistan could be that the international community has been addressing violence against women as a governance issue. Mr Krishnan stated that in Afghanistan it is not about governance, it is 'a structural issue that is burnt right into the psyche of everyone who is born in Afghanistan'. He explained that addressing the issue through physical measures, such as constructing justice department buildings and placing a couple more women in police stations will not solve the problem. He argued that a paradigm shift was required to change the mindset of people regarding women's rights.<sup>22</sup>

### ***Combating violence against women***

16.15 At the Tokyo Conference, Australia announced that it would commit \$17.7m over three years to combat violence against women and girls in Afghanistan.<sup>23</sup> Oxfam would like the funding to focus substantially on enhancing the implementation of the EVAW law, including 'through targeted, long-term, programmatic support to women's rights organisations working on the ground in Afghanistan'.<sup>24</sup>

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18 Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, *Fifth Report: Situation of Economic and Social Rights in Afghanistan*, November/December 2011, p. 93.

19 *Committee Hansard*, 4 December 2012, p. 55.

20 *Committee Hansard*, 22 March 2013, p. 12.

21 *Committee Hansard*, 22 March 2013, p. 9.

22 *Committee Hansard*, 4 December 2012, p. 55.

23 *Committee Hansard*, 22 March 2013, p. 7.

24 *Committee Hansard*, 22 March 2013, p. 8.

16.16 Although a number of NGOs welcomed the Australian Government's contribution to combating violence against women in Afghanistan and supporting the women, peace and security agenda, they were calling on the Australian Government to do more toward achieving these goals.<sup>25</sup> They made a series of recommendations including:

- provide funding for participation by Afghan women in peace related international summits and to champion women's representation at the High Peace Council and provisional peace councils by 2013–2014 in line with the minimum 25 per cent quota for female parliamentarians;<sup>26</sup>
- support the capacity for the ministry of women's affairs to implement the EVAW law and for civil society organisations to monitor its implementation;
- support the development and implementation of Afghanistan's national plan on UN Security Council resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security so that 'it is not left unfulfilled like some other plans such as the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan'.<sup>27</sup>

16.17 Amnesty International also called on the Australian Government to release details on the implementation of the Afghan component of the Australian National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security.<sup>28</sup>

16.18 Together with Oxfam, Amnesty International raised an additional area where they believed there was scope for concrete action to improve the status of women. They suggested ensuring practical, high-quality training to Afghan National Security Forces including the ANP that would include gender sensitivity, human rights, humanitarian law, rule of law and literacy during 2013–14 and beyond.<sup>29</sup> Ms Cousins, Oxfam, informed the committee that:

While the Ministry of Interior Affairs in Afghanistan has set a target for recruiting 5,000 women police by the end of 2014, currently there are only 1,370 women police out of the 149,000 police officers in the Afghan National Police. That is the same level as it was about a year ago. We are not seeing a whole lot of progress. Policewomen face enormous challenges, including sexual harassment, opposition from male police and community members, lack of promotional prospects in the police and being used for menial tasks. Greater emphasis must be placed on projects which can be ODA eligible to address these barriers if more police are to be recruited, retained and able to do their jobs effectively.<sup>30</sup>

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25 See for example, Amnesty International, Oxfam and the Afghan Australian Development Organisation, *Committee Hansard*, 22 March 2013, pp. 7–9.

26 *Committee Hansard*, 22 March 2013, pp. 7–8.

27 *Committee Hansard*, 22 March 2013, p. 8.

28 *Committee Hansard*, 22 March 2013, p. 8.

29 *Committee Hansard*, 22 March 2013, p. 8.

30 *Committee Hansard*, 22 March 2013, p. 8.

16.19 The AFP informed the committee that its members work on gender related issues with the ANP and 'actively encourage ANP executive to provide female ANP members with greater levels of access to formal training and opportunities within the organisation'. It could not, however, provide the committee with information on the number of police women that have been mentored and trained by the AFP in Afghanistan as the data was not available. While it indicated that the number was small, the AFP reported that ten senior female ANP members had completed the 'violence against women' program. With regard to improving attitudes toward females and a greater awareness of the importance of gender equality, the AFP noted that:

...human rights and gender issues are covered as part of the Afghan Ministry of Interior approved Basic Patrolman's Course, Leadership Management Course and management training for supervisors programs at the Police Training Centre.

16.20 Finally, before AFP members are deployed to Afghanistan, they receive pre-deployment training which includes UN certified teaching components relating to human rights standards in an operational environment, such as 'Women, Peace and Security'. Several women have been deployed to Afghanistan.<sup>31</sup>

16.21 Defence informed the committee that Australia's National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security was not released until March 2012. Because the ADF's mentoring program in Afghanistan for the ANA 4th Brigade was nearing completion at the time, the measures laid out in the Plan were not incorporated into the ADF's training program. Defence noted, however, that 'it would be difficult to prioritise and implement such training in the ANA mentoring environment'. According to Defence, there are very few women in the ANA—less than 400 out of a uniformed strength exceeding 175,000 personnel. It has no records of ADF units having undertaken mentoring roles involving female ANA personnel.<sup>32</sup>

#### *Committee view*

16.22 The committee believes that, through their training, mentoring and advisory capacity with the ANP and ANA, there is significant opportunity for the ADF and the AFP to generate a greater awareness of the importance of gender equality and to encourage the recruitment to, and promotion of women in, the Afghan military and police forces.

#### **Recommendation 26**

**16.23 The committee recommends that the ADF and AFP take the opportunity in their training, mentoring and advisory role with their Afghan counterparts to help create an awareness of the importance of gender equality and human rights and to encourage greater participation of Afghan women in Afghanistan's military and police forces.**

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31 Answer to written question on notice no. 1 following 22 March 2013 hearing.

32 Answer to written question on notice no. 6 following 22 March 2013 hearing.

### *Summary*

16.24 To lift its people out of poverty, Afghanistan must include women as part of its development process, including in policy formulation and decision making and implementation. The committee notes that Afghanistan has identified gender equality as an important cross-cutting issue central to the success of its overall development strategy. Evidence suggests, however, that as Afghanistan draws closer to taking charge of its own affairs, much more needs to be done to improve the status of women and to then safeguard that position.

16.25 The committee also notes Oxfam's and Mr Krishnan's acknowledgement of Australia's contribution to helping combat violence against women in Afghanistan and CARE's praise of the DIAC-funded programs for livelihood. Clearly, however, much more needs to be done in this area. The committee commends the Australian Government for its strong recognition of the rights of women in its aid programs. It heeds the cautionary words from a number of witnesses, however, on the importance of achieving qualitative change in women's representation. The committee also notes the opportunities to encourage gender equality through Australia's contribution to training, mentoring and advising the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police.

### *Committee view*

16.26 The committee takes the opportunity to acknowledge the work that Australian funds have done in promoting gender equality in Afghanistan. As suggested by NGOs, however, there is a pressing need for more to be done especially to eliminate violence against women and girls. Clearly, removing all forms of discrimination against women is a key cross cutting-issues that should have a central place in all Australian aid programs in Afghanistan across all sectors.

### **Recommendation 27**

**16.27 The committee recommends that the Australian Government continue to provide funding for the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission.**

### **Recommendation 28**

**16.28 Considering that gender equality is an objective that cuts across all sectors covered by development assistance, the committee recommends that all relevant recommendations in this report give special attention to promoting gender equality and protecting the rights of women.**

### **Recommendation 29**

**16.29 The committee recommends that AusAID prioritise long-term support for the delivery of services for women and girls, and for programs that advocate for women's rights. It recommends further that the Australian Government include Afghanistan as a key country focus for implementing Australia's National Action Plan on Women Peace and Security in order to address the related issues of violence against women and women's political participation.**



**Recommendation 30**

**16.30** The committee recommends that the Australian Government directly fund Afghan women's organisations with both core and project funding, to enable these organisations to develop their capacity to hold their government to account and realise their leadership potential.

**Recommendation 31**

**16.31** The committee recommends that AusAID works closely with the Afghan Education Ministry and relevant NGOs to encourage the implementation of community-based education schemes with the objective of increasing the accessibility of schooling and bridging the gender gap with respect to illiteracy.

**Recommendation 32**

**16.32** The committee recommends that the Australian Government commit adequate funds over three years towards the National Priority Program: 'Capacity development to implement the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan'.

