

BOOK REVIEW

Gender and International Aid in Afghanistan: The Politics and Effects of Intervention

By Lina Abirafeh¹

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Reviewed by Julia H. Smith²

Gender and International Aid in Afghanistan: The Politics and Effects of Intervention is a damning critic of the attempt of an aid intervention to transform gender relations. Developed out of the author's PhD thesis, the book reads well with only moments of preoccupation with methodology and theory reminding the reader that this is an academic text.

Abirafeh takes on the role of a participant observer. Having worked extensively in the gender sector in Afghanistan, her understanding of gender issues is reflected throughout the text. However, instead of expressing sympathy for an intervention she has been a part of, Abirafeh is refreshingly reflexive and critical. This may be because she is from the region and so able to relate with local people. She notes that she often felt she filled the role of "cultural interpreter" as Afghans expected her to understand Islam and allowed her into privileged spaces that Western aid workers were excluded

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from.³ This enables her to present the reader with both sides of the story, illustrated through semi-structured interviews and questionnaires with Afghans and representatives from aid organisations.

The book seeks "to understand the promise of freedom of an intervention and how it is understood at highest and lowest levels . . . to illuminate discourse of gender intervention in aftermath of conflict in order to better understand how they influence gender order."⁴ Abirafeh argues that the gendered nature of the aid intervention in Afghanistan, following the NATO-led conflict starting in 2001, failed to live up to its promises to empower women, and may have in fact contributed to a backlash against such empowerment. She deconstructs the empowerment discourse of interventions to demonstrate that the term is often negotiated for diverse purposes, de-politicalized, implemented in a top down fashion that assumes women cannot empower themselves, and reflects only western, individualist understandings of rights.⁵

Abirafeh begins with a gendered history of Afghanistan, pointing out how gender relations have remained central to politics throughout Afghanistan's history. She argues that aid interventions following the NATO-led conflict did not take this history into account, and were not aware of the cultural nuances of Afghani gender relationships when they initiated programmes. This resulted in two notable neglects: lack of recognition of Afghani versions of feminism, which focus on the dual oppression of occupation and patriarchy; and the failure to recognize that Afghani women's identities stem from their relationships with family and community. Most importantly, Abirafeh argues, the intervention did not consult Afghani women (or men).

Instead, the aid intervention applied its own liberation discourse, something Abirafeh demonstrates through analysis of the Western preoccupation with the chaddar/bourka. She convincingly argues that Afghani women do not prioritize their dress as a gender issue, and that both Afghani men and women see the Western obsession with what Afghani women wear as a corrupting cultural imperialism. She writes poetically, "there is a conflicting world view in the notion that Afghan women are bourka'ed damsels in distress awaiting salvation from knights in shining tanks."⁶

Abirafeh then goes on to evaluate gender interventions of aid organisations and finds most fail to communicate and implement their projects effectively. The cause of poor implementation, Abirafeh argues, is a propensity to address what is a political issue (gender inequality) with technical solutions, such as microfinance projects. She argues that the exclusive focus on women, while ignoring men, has resulted in lost opportunities and caused a troubling backlash. Her analysis demonstrates the superficial nature of gendered-aid interventions; describing, for example, how women were 'rounded up to vote' for Western photo opportunities, but that there was a lack of civic education about democratic process. This raises questions about how such interventions measure progress. Abirafeh suggests that a

³ Lina Abirafeh, *Gender and International Aid in Afghanistan: The Politics and Effects of Intervention* (London: MacFarland and Company, 2009), p.13.

⁴ Abirafeh, *Gender and International Aid*, p. 17

⁵ Abirafeh, *Gender and International Aid*, p. 29

⁶ Abirafeh, *Gender and International Aid*, p. 37

true measure is, not gender disaggregated data or the number of women wearing the *bourka*, but based on Afghani voices.

Abirageh takes time to understand Afghani identities and how they relate to gender. She notes the high importance of Islam and nationalist identities, both of which are viewed in conflict with Western influences. She further notes that Afghani men view gender rights as a zero-sum equation (i.e. that women can only gain rights at the expense of men), though it remains unclear if this is because of their own cultural perceptions or because of how rights have been framed by the aid apparatus. Excerpts from interviews suggest that Afghani women want changes to be slow, to benefit men and women, and to not be imposed from outside. Promises made to women are viewed as unfulfilled. Training did not result in employment; microfinance loans did not result in improved business; learning about women's rights did not create a context where women could enjoy such rights. Here a contradiction remains unexplored: on the one hand Abirafeh is arguing that women feel their expectations of empowerment have not been met, on the other she is saying that they feel change is being forced too quickly.

Abirafeh illustrates the position of women in Afghani culture as the holders of family and community honour. She notes how the aid apparatus has impacted this system for both men and women. Women are placed at greater risk of losing their honour when they are required to go out of their homes to participate in aid programmes in order to support their families. Meanwhile, dependence on aid means men feel they are losing their place of honour within the family.

In a series of interviews with couples and members of the same household she attempts to link the externally influenced change in gender roles with domestic violence. She notes the challenge lies in measuring domestic violence, but supports views that violence has increased since the intervention. This is perhaps the weakest part of her argument, as a reading of the quotes and data she presents suggests that domestic violence has been a common experience of Afghani women prior to the conflict and intervention. The reader can imagine that previously blame for such violence may have been placed on the Taliban, and prior to that on the Soviet-American conflict in the region. This sort of passing of culpability neglects to address the extreme pervasiveness of gender-based violence, and the challenges of transforming it.

Abirafeh concludes that "eight years later, one could argue, women are neither liberated nor empowered."⁷ She links this to continued insecurity and asks if imposing social change through international aid is the right approach. Her book answers quite clearly – No, freedom is only won from the inside, and external efforts to destabilise gender-based order creates new tensions.

A good book, it leaves the reader wanting to know more, and this Abirafeh achieves. In particular her argument could have been enriched with greater discussion of the broader politico-economic context in Afghanistan. The fact that men were unable to provide for their families is a common theme but it is not explained if this is the result of the conflict, of the previous Taliban rule, pervasive poverty, or a result of aid or all of these reasons. Furthermore, she does not mention if the

⁷ Abirafeh, *Gender and International Aid*, p. 168

increased involvement of women in work outside the home is impacting their work inside the home. It is possible that one of the unintended consequences of the aid intervention is the doubling of the burden of work on Afghani women as they take on paid employment and continue to be responsible for care work. Such a double burden would be contradictory to empowerment aims. It would also be interesting to know more specifically about what motivates women to participate in aid programmes – Abirafeh assumes it is for financial gain, but this is never substantiated.

Overall the book provides a much needed critical gender analysis to the literature on aid interventions. As a reader who has also worked in the field, I often found myself nodding in recognition of the many challenges and contradictions embedded in attempts at gender mainstreaming. In particular Abirafeh's authentic inclusion of male and female perspectives, and attention to the changing roles of men, as well as women, advances discussion beyond the too often women-focused perspectives that tell only half the story. The book documents many of the pitfalls of implementing gender programmes, and therefore has relevance for researchers and practitioners engaged in gender issues.