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We shall speak where others are silent? Fragments of an oral history of Norwegian assistance to Afghan women



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Norway has a strong political commitment to promote the rights of women and their participation in public life through its development cooperation programs. A government White Paper on the subject in 2008 proclaimed that “Norway shall speak out where others prefer to be silent” – though without the question mark appearing in the title of this study.¹ The added question mark conveys the complications typically arising when principles are translated into practice. In the case of Afghanistan – where Norwegian aid projects predate the much larger development cooperation program after 2001 – the complications were daunting.

How far and how fast could we – as outsiders – go in influencing values in a conservative Muslim society? What elements of “the Norwegian model” in matters of gender equality could be exported to Afghanistan? How should it best be done? What capacity and tested strategies could we bring to the table? In a different vein, critics asked if the aid program was primarily shaped by concerns other than aiding Afghan women. Did the huge appeal of women’s rights across the entire political spectrum in Norway, and particularly girls’ schools, serve to cushion the controversy over the country’s military engagement – in effect, to camouflage the war?² Similarly, was support for women’s rights in Afghanistan another ‘niche activity’ that would enhance Norway’s international standing as an advocate for international peace and human rights, in the process opening doors and exercising influence? As President Obama said in Oslo when he received the Nobel Peace Prize, Norway is a country that “punches above its weight”.

This study approaches these questions from two, quite different vantage points. The first section looks at the political discourse in Norway. It draws in particular on debates in the Parliament over the Norwegian military and civilian aid engagement in Afghanistan after 2001, as well as a separate but reinforcing discourse on the use of development assistance to promote women’s rights abroad. The second part takes the inquiry to individuals who in different capacities have worked in Afghanistan to implement, oversee, or report on the aid program. This part consists of fragments of an oral history, drawn from interviews with diplomats, aid workers and aid officials located at different places and times in the Norwegian system for development cooperation.

A note on the method of data collection and presentation for the oral history fragments is in order. The interviews are translated from Norwegian, with some edits and explanatory comments when needed. The first two interviews constitute a section called “Perspectives from the Field”, and are rendered as they unfolded in a question and answer format. They set the stage for a much longer section dealing with issues and dilemmas arising from delivering the aid, called “Managing the Aid”. This section draws on almost a dozen interviews. The interviews are cut and pasted according to topic, but the main objective is to let the informants speak. The author/interviewer intervenes only rarely, and then *sotto voce*. Each clip of text is credited to its source. Some informants preferred to remain anonymous (they are identified only with a number); other interviews were “on the record”.³ This method is also used in the third section, entitled “Women’s Rights as High Politics and Low Politics”.

¹ St.meld nr 11 (2007-2008). *På like vilkår: Kvinners rettigheter og likestilling I utviklingspolitikken*. <https://www.regjeringen.no/nb/dokumenter/stmeld-nr-11-2007-2008/id497062/>, p.6.

² In the interest of full disclosure, note that this author developed this theme in a recent article, “Å kamuflere en krig,” *Internasjonal Politikk*, 01/2015.

³ All respondents were invited to review their statements for accuracy and form of expression. Their proposed changes (and some were extensive) have all been accepted.

The study as a whole is a modest contribution to the history of a complex topic. Given time and resource constraints, only a small number of respondents was interviewed. These were selected in part based on their availability (in person or by Skype), and their willingness to be interviewed. Since the study focuses on the political and management aspects of the aid program, the respondents are mostly government officials.

1 Afghanistan and Afghan women in Norwegian political discourse, 2001-2014

The discussion of Norway's role and obligations, if any, to aid Afghan women and support their rights was an extension of two other distinct discourses: Norway's engagement in Afghanistan after 2001, and the long-standing commitment of Norway to promote the rights and equality of women throughout the world, where needed, through political engagement and development assistance. In retrospect, this discussion divides into three distinct periods, bounded primarily by developments in the international military engagement in Afghanistan. These were, (i) the US invasion of Afghanistan after the September 11 attacks in 2001 and its aftermath; (ii) the second half of the decade when NATO became more deeply involved militarily but also stressed the importance of development and rights to end the conflict; and (iii) preparations towards the end of the decade for disengagement of international military forces while exploring talks with the Taliban.

The Norwegian political discourse followed this rhythm, rising and falling with the main events in the military operation in which Norway participated throughout. Yet the substance naturally reflected the particulars of the Norwegian engagement as well as the political landscape at home. A general and long-standing commitment to promote the rights and equality of women globally was part of this landscape. The commitment was most vigorously championed on the center-left of the political spectrum, and sounded a clear radical note in an Action Plan (2007) and White Paper (2008) on gender equality, with the latter suggesting that the Norwegian model was suitable for export.⁴

1.1 The first phase 2001-05

Initially, there was much media attention to the women now out of burqa in Kabul. "We have seen them in TV reports from the days after the fall of the Taliban. Happy women's faces in the streets of Kabul – they have thrown off the burqa..."⁵, a representative of the Church of Norway who visited the city in April 2002 exclaimed. The state TV channel (NRK) managed to get footage of a woman nursing a baby, with a glimpse of the breast as a sign of liberation. The Afghan women in burqa had until then been a concern primarily of humanitarian aid agencies working in Afghanistan during the Taliban regime and Western feminist activists, although their plight had been routinely mentioned by the UN Security Council when condemning or imposing sanctions on the Taliban regime in the late 1990s for its support of international terrorism and participation in the narcotics trade. After the US invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001, the US government explicitly promoted an understanding of Afghan women as transiting from being victims of repression to beneficiaries of liberation. The radio speech by Laura Bush on 17 November 2001, followed by an 11-page report by the US State Department on the repression of women under the Taliban, was widely noted.

⁴ Some analysts interpreted the White Paper as declaring the Norwegian model was for export without qualifications. *Hilde Selbervik* and *Marit Østebø*, Gender Equality in International Aid: What has Norwegian Gender Politics got to do with it? *Gender Technology and Development*, 17(2):205-228, July 2013. A closer reading of the document suggests a more nuanced interpretation.

⁵ Den norske kirkes nord/sør-informasjon april 2002. <http://www.kui.no/index.cfm?id=89605>

In the Norwegian parliament, however, the past plight or future promise of Afghan women were hardly mentioned in the debates on developments in Afghanistan in late 2001 and early 2002. The parliamentarians spoke almost exclusively about the 9/11 attacks, the US invasion and Norwegian military support to the operation (Operation Enduring Freedom, OEF), and to a lesser extent of the need for humanitarian assistance. Members of Parliament had in this period four main opportunities to reflect on the conflict and shape a Norwegian response. The statement by the outgoing Prime Minister, Jens Stoltenberg, to the Parliament on 30 September was followed by a general debate. Two subsequent discussions took place in mid-November and early December, in which the principal members of the incoming government and all the other political parties participated. In February 2002 the Parliament authorized financing of the Norwegian contribution to OEF, which occasioned a fourth debate.

The debates focused overwhelmingly on the threat of terrorism - seen as global and affecting Norway as well - and the need for Norway to act as a trustworthy ally of the US by contributing to the OEF. Humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan was a subsidiary focus, perhaps because it was something all the parties could agree upon, and because it was felt that Norway had particular obligations in this regard by virtue of chairing the Afghanistan Support Group, formed by international donors during the Taliban regime to coordinate humanitarian assistance, and still functioning until mid-2002. As a result, the Parliament readily appropriated an extra 200 million NOK for humanitarian assistance to the country.

All the political parties except one endorsed the government's support for the US invasion and Norwegian participation in OEF. That made for a solid majority composed of the governing center-right coalition and the main opposition, the Labour Party. However, the strong dissent by one party on the left, SV, created a political dynamic that made it necessary for the majority to articulate the rationale for its position. For the most part, the speakers invoked conventional national security arguments – Norway must stand by its main allies and its obligations under Article 5 of NATO. When SV called for a halt to the bombing in late 2001, supporters of the war claimed that when faced with a ruthless and repressive enemy like the Taliban, there was no alternative to military force.

In this at times quite tense debate, Afghan women figured only briefly, and mostly for rhetorical purposes. The following exchange in Parliament on 15 November 2001 illustrates the tenor of the discussion. The Prime Minister, Kjell Magne Bondevik, warns that a halt to the bombing will derail the military progress and the political process underway in the UN to replace the Taliban. A failed process will open for the return of a terrible regime:

After they seized power, the Taliban have ignored the basic needs and fundamental human rights of the Afghan population. Women are exposed to abuse. Adultery is punished with death. Girls over 8 years old are banned from going to school. Arbitrary torture and executions are common. Individuals die or are killed as a direct result of the regime's policy. This is one of the most repressive regimes in our times.⁶

The SV leader, Kristin Halvorsen calls again on the government to engage itself in the UN and in Washington to bring about a halt in the US bombing in Afghanistan. “[H]alf of the Norwegian population, bishops and large parts of our cultural life [*kultur-Norge*]” want a halt in the bombing, she

⁶ <https://www.stortinget.no/no/Saker-og-publikasjoner/Publikasjoner/Referater/Stortinget/2001-2002/011115/1#a68> Author's translation.

claims⁷. This brings a rebuttal from the Foreign Minister, Jan Petersen, who leans on the fate of Afghan women to defend the ongoing military campaign:

I noticed today the photo on the first page of [the Norwegian daily] *Aftenposten*. It was of an Afghan woman, and it showed the whole face, a strong face, and not only the eyes, which is what we have been used to seeing. And this says a lot about the opportunities before us now, because the Taliban is a strongly repressive regime, it is responsible for many violations of human rights, and women in particular have been repressed. This is the kind of regime that now is being pushed back and is retreating.⁸

Towards the end of the debate, the Prime Minister sums up why Norway must maintain its support for the US and the ongoing military offensive in Afghanistan and why the alternative resolutions put forward by SV should be rejected.⁹ The promise to women and girls in the post-Taliban order now appears as one of three main reasons in his argument.

Altogether, there were only four, brief references to Afghan women in the lengthy parliamentary session on Afghanistan in November 2001. In the follow-up debate on December 5, the subject was not mentioned at all. The same applies to the debate in February 2002. The matter before the Parliament on the two latter occasions was financing and clarification of the Norwegian military contribution to OEF; both subjects sparked a wide-ranging discussion on several aspects of the ongoing war in Afghanistan and prospects for the future.

Two things are striking in this discourse. The first is that Afghan women were mentioned so rarely. Perhaps the point was too obvious, something that all the parties could agree on: there was simply no need to mention it. Yet it is equally striking that when the subject did come up, it was used in a deeply instrumentalized fashion to defend a controversial war and pillory its opponents.

A similar pattern was evidenced in a subsequent brief, but widely noticed, media exchange on the relationship between women's rights and the war. Labour Party member Marit Nybakk, who also was a long-standing member of the parliamentary defense committee, had not raised the issue of Afghan women during the parliamentary debates in late 2001 and early 2002. In the autumn of 2002, however, she spoke out in an interview with the Norwegian newspaper *Dagbladet*.

This is a war of liberation, also a war of liberation for Afghanistan's women. The women-dimension is central to me. I have in my years been concerned with the extreme repression of women by the Taliban regime. For many years, we in the West closed our eyes to the grotesque treatment of women because it did not touch ourselves. Then 11 September happened and, with it, the US-led war against the Taliban regime and the terror network al-Qaida. This is an absolutely necessary war. Al-Qaida is one of the greatest threats against women's rights in our time.¹⁰

At this time, SV was still leading the criticism of the OEF for the civilian casualties it caused and its use of cluster bombs, but other groups joined in, including from the church. Critics were particularly concerned about the government's assignment of 6 fighter planes (F-16) to OEF, some accusing

⁷ <https://www.stortinget.no/no/Saker-og-publikasjoner/Publikasjoner/Referater/Stortinget/2001-2002/011115/1#a2> Author's translation.

⁸ <https://www.stortinget.no/no/Saker-og-publikasjoner/Publikasjoner/Referater/Stortinget/2001-2002/011115/1#a2> Author's translation.

⁹ It was rejected by a large majority.

¹⁰ *Dagbladet* 11 August 2002. <http://www.dagbladet.no/nyheter/2002/08/11/345724.html> Author's translation.

Norwegian pilots of bombing Afghan women and children. The main opposition party, the Labour Party – historically the main competitor of SV for votes on the left - still stood behind the government's policy of full support for the war, and did not endorse the call for a bombing halt. Against this background, it is understandable that Marit Nybakk was accused of using the plight of Afghan women as a shield against criticism of the war.

The response was formulated by another woman, Elizabeth Eide, an activist with a long-time involvement in Afghanistan that originated in support for the Afghan mujahedin in their war against Soviet and Afghan communist forces. This support was particularly strong among the Norwegian radical left at the time. In a stinging counter-attack in another Norwegian newspaper, *Dagsavisen*, Eide took on Nybakk and a fellow Labour Party woman, Helga Strømme, who had endorsed Nybakk's position. It was totally wrong to claim that those who opposed the war did not care about the plight of Afghan women, Eide wrote. She and many others had in fact worked actively to support Afghan women and document their plight. But would bombing the country help?

For us who have defended alternative and peaceful solutions after 11 September, it is difficult to show what the result of such alternatives would have been insofar as they have not been tried. But we know what the war strategy has led to: thousands of Afghan civilian victims and brutal treatment of prisoners of war, while most of the Al Qaida and Taliban leaders have not been captured. There is armed conflict in several provinces. Do not Nybakk and Strømme realise how opportunistic it is for the US leadership to refer to the fall of Taliban and the rights of women when they have failed to reach the main objective of the invasion?¹¹

The debate on Norway's participation in the war continued in the next three years under the center-right coalition, though with less intensity after the government in mid-2003 withdrew the contingent of F-16s. Norwegian Special Forces were still assigned to OEF, but little was known about their operation. At the same time, a much more controversial issue arose when the government assigned a contingent of army engineers to the US-led occupation forces in Iraq, although describing their mission as "humanitarian". As the debate over Iraq intensified, no one seemed to remember the Afghan women.

1.2 Deeping involvement and a "comprehensive approach":2005-2010

By mid-decade, several events came together that brought renewed attention to women in Norway's policy towards Afghanistan. In retrospect, they appear to constitute a critical juncture.

The September 2005 elections marked significant gains for the Labour Party, but not enough to form a government on its own. Two smaller parties – of which SV was one –were necessary to form a government. Constraints on participation in the US-led coalition in Afghanistan were now internalized in the government. The first result was a decision to formally end Norway's participation in OEF. The practical effects were limited since the fighter jet contingent had already been terminated, and the Special Forces were simply moved from OEF to the NATO-led command of the "security assistance forces" (ISAF), as the international contingent was called. ISAF operated under a UN mandate, and as it originally was designed as stabilization rather than a combat force, SV had not objected to Norwegian participation in this operation.

¹¹ *Dagsavisen* 15 September 2002. Available at <http://folk.uio.no/eliei/bombingnybakk.htm> Author's translation

What initially seemed an easy transition for the center-left coalition soon turned more problematic. The international forces faced sharply increased resistance in the southern provinces of Afghanistan in 2005-6. As the insurgents were making unexpected gains, the US and the NATO command requested allies to send reinforcements; the Norwegian government was asked as well. While Norwegian forces technically would have served under ISAF's new Regional Command South, and thus under the legitimizing mandate of the UN, they would serve in a combat environment similar to that of the OEF. The center-left government denied the request. This set off a dialectic political development that ended with a widening and deepening involvement, although with a greater emphasis on economic and political development assistance.

Not surprisingly, the center-right political parties now in opposition attacked the withdrawal from OEF with national security arguments, claiming the government's "no" to US and NATO endangered Norway's standing in the NATO alliance and undermined its credibility as a trustworthy ally of the United States. To defend itself, the government stressed that the war could not be won by military force alone; social and economic development was critical. The premise was already being discussed by NATO members in preparation for the 2006 alliance summit, Jonas Gahr Støre, the Norwegian Foreign Minister, told Parliament in October the same year.¹² A comprehensive strategy that took account of social and political development was needed, he continued. Recognised this, he announced a change of course (*taktskifte*). This meant, first, a strengthening of the Norwegian military role in northern Afghanistan – where Norway had a deployed a contingent under ISAF command – and, importantly, a strengthening of the civilian side.

Norway here has an important role to play. The government wishes to strengthen support for reconstruction and social and economic development....We contribute this year with about 300 million crowns to reconstruction of institutions, to education, and poverty reduction. This is an increase of 50 million from 2005. We have contributed about 90 million NOK annually in humanitarian assistance....and to reconstruction for the police and the legal system.¹³

Aid commitments increased rapidly from then on to reach 736 million NOK in 2008. With development assistance moving to the forefront of the Afghanistan discussion, Afghan women reappeared in the parliamentary discourse, but not primarily as a victim of repression or beneficiary of the intervention. As the foreign minister noted in his 2006 speech, the women were essential assets for development and peace.

Norway is a strong advocate to strengthen the position of women. In order to achieve social and economic development and lasting peace, it is necessary to mobilize the resources that Afghan women represent.¹⁴

This thinking resonated with a broader political dynamic at home that was quite independent of the evolving situation in Afghanistan. Promotion of gender equality and the rights of women had been integrated in Norwegian development assistance strategies at least since the 1990s,¹⁵ and accelerated under the center-left government in the second half of the 2000s. An Action Plan to this effect was

¹² <https://www.stortinget.no/no/Saker-og-publikasjoner/Publikasjoner/Referater/Stortinget/2006-2007/061024/1/#a1>

¹³ Støre, *Ibid.* Author's translation

¹⁴ *Ibid.* Author's translation

¹⁵ A five-year plan for women and gender equality in development cooperation had been launched in 1997. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Strategi for Kvinne- og Likestillingsrettet Utviklingssamarbeid 1997-2005*. Oslo: 1997.

launched in 2007,¹⁶ and a government White Paper on the rights and equality of women appeared the following year.¹⁷ A special budget line to support women's rights was introduced in the development budget. Against this background, and with vocal advocates of women's rights inside and outside the government, it was not surprising that the situation of Afghan women came to figure prominently in aid policy.

The *taktskifte* in 2006 also harmonized with evolving strategic thinking in NATO. Increasingly recognizing that the war in Afghanistan might not be winnable, the alliance embraced a new "comprehensive approach" designed to bring civilian and military efforts closer together in its operations. "There can be no security without development, and no development without security", the Declaration of the Riga summit in December 2006 read.¹⁸ Operational and doctrinal developments followed to institutionalize the "comprehensive approach" in NATO's engagement in Afghanistan.

The new strategic direction reinforced and further legitimized the inclination of the Norwegian government to stress support to the civilian sector as an integral part of its overall response to the conflict. Civilian development found support across the political sector, and promoting women's rights even more so. For a government squeezed between critics on the right (for not sending combat troops to aid the US in Afghanistan), and its own left (for being too involved in the war), the *taktskifte* towards a greater civilian assistance role offered some relief. The solid and broad consensus on civilian aid, including women's rights, became even more welcome as the Norwegian military contingent in northern Afghanistan found itself in a situation that was widely understood at home as a "war". Aid served in this sense as a camouflage to divert attention from a controversial war.

The government had in early 2008 announced plans to increase civilian aid to the same level as military expenditures.¹⁹ The following year, it set the priorities for the aid program. Education, energy and resource utilization, and civil society would be prioritized sectors; support for women would be integrated in all aid programs across the board, as would anti-corruption measures. The program generated little or no debate when Foreign Minister Støre introduced it to the Parliament in February 2010. Aid to Afghan women continued to receive solid support across the political spectrum. A member of the SV emphasized the need to do more, referencing a Human Rights Watch report that concluded eight years of foreign intervention had not brought much improvement for Afghan women.²⁰

The only other discussion relating to Afghan women in the Parliament that day was an exchange among members of the ruling parties that, in effect, followed the fault lines of a major dilemma: how far and fast could - and should - external donors try to change the conditions of women in Afghanistan society? Some male, parliamentary members of the ruling coalition argued for caution and a careful pace in the name of respect for Afghan tradition. It produced a spirited response from some of the female parliamentarians of the ruling coalition parties. Compromising on women's rights meant compromising on basic rights as well as the struggle against poverty and peace. Education, health

¹⁶ Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 'Action Plan for Women's Rights and Gender Equality in Development Cooperation 2007-2009'. Oslo:2007.

¹⁷ På like vilkår, see note 1.

¹⁸ <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2006/p06-150e.htm>

¹⁹ Kristian Berg Harpviken, A Peace Nation Takes up Arms. The Norwegian Engagement in Afghanistan. Oslo: PRIO, 2011. <https://www.prio.org/Publications/Publication/?x=7196>

²⁰ Rannveig Kvifte Andresen, 18 February 2010, <https://www.stortinget.no/Global/pdf/Referater/Stortinget/2009-2010/s100218.pdf>

services, equality and political rights of women were foundational for social progress. The male members conceded a little, and a core consensus in favour of women's rights was restored.²¹

As noted, the consensus offered the government a welcome reference point when reaching for evidence that some things were going right in an increasingly difficult war. By 2010, the difficulties were mounting also in Faryab province where Norway led the Provincial Reconstruction Team under ISAF.

When Norway had assumed the lead of this PRT in 2005, the province seemed quiet, and the center-left government had few qualms about continuing the commitment initiated by the outgoing center-right government. It soon became apparent, however, that Faryab was not a quiet corner. The PRT-camp had been attacked by an angry and evidently organized mob already in February 2006. Soon, the PRT started taking casualties and mounted offensive operations.²² By the end of 2010, 9 Norwegian soldiers had been killed. It seemed Norway – while out of OEF – was at war in Afghanistan after all. As the public debate intensified, opinion polls showed a public about evenly divided on the issue of maintaining or withdrawing the troops.²³

Against this background, Norway's sizable contribution to develop the educational sector in Faryab came into sharp focus. Looking for good news from Faryab, government officials cited education statistics. In the public message, "schools" typically became "schools for girls". The media generally obliged. It seemed every Norwegian reporter visiting Afghanistan had been to a girls' school. Even a story from Faryab for the journal of the armed forces, *Forsvarets Forum*, opened with an enthusiastic description of a newly built school, accompanied with pictures of girls in their school uniform.²⁴

Yet it must be noted that the commitment to aid the educational sector had deeper roots. Norwegian NGOs had operated schools in some provinces during the war in the 1980s, and this had continued under the Taliban. Some of these schools also had girls discreetly attending. In 1997, the then deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Jan Egeland, visited Kabul to discuss humanitarian aid with Taliban ministers.²⁵ He offered among other things to build 6 new schools. The Taliban initially responded

²¹ <https://www.stortinget.no/Global/pdf/Referater/Stortinget/2009-2010/s100218.pdf>

²² Astri Suhrke, *When More is Less. The International Project in Afghanistan*. London: Hurst, 2011, chp.4.

²³ «Nordmenn vil ha soldatene ut av Afghanistan». *Aftenposten*, 2 December, 2009.

<http://www.aftenposten.no/nyheter/iriks/Nordmenn-vil-ha-soldatene-ut-av-Afghanistan-5594799.html>. The figures suggest the country was almost evenly divided. In this poll, 45 per cent of the respondents favoured withdrawal, while in another poll two days previously, 43 percent wanted the troops to remain. In August 2010, 49 per cent wanted the troops out (<http://www.vg.no/nyheter/utenriks/afghanistan/meningsmaaling-norge-boer-ut-av-afghanistan/a/10026063/>) and a year later, 47 per cent wanted them to remain (<http://www.vg.no/nyheter/innenriks/forsvaret/nordmenn-stoetter-afghanistan-operasjon/a/10032055/>) .

²⁴ Jahn Rønne, "Det er i øyne du får et glimt av håp for Afghanistans fremtid", *Forsvarets Forum*, 12.04.2007. At:

http://www.fofo.no/%C2%ABDet+er+i+%C3%B8ynene+du+f%C3%A5r+glimtet+av+h%C3%A5p+for+Afgghanistan+fremtid%C2%BB.b7C_wZDI25.ips

²⁵ Norway was at the time head of the Afghan Support Group, an intergovernmental network of countries providing humanitarian aid to the country. The Norwegian aid program, channeled through Norwegian NGOs, included mine-clearance and smaller community projects. The government's press notice about the visit said «Egeland vil spesielt fokusere på FN's fredsbestrebelsers, menneskerettigheter og kvinners situasjon og den økende narkotikaproduksjonen. Situasjonen for de omlag 3 - 4 mill. flyktningene (inkludert internflyktninger) vil være sentralt.» https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/statssekretaer_egeland_besoker/id238321/ The account of the discussion about schools is based on recollections by ambassador Jan-Erik Leikvang, then in Islamabad but with responsibility also for Afghanistan, who accompanied Egeland on the trip. Interview with author, 12.01.2015.

favourably, saying they would like 10. “Girls have to be admitted,” Egeland insisted. The Taliban declined that offer, but once they were overthrown, schools for girls became one of the most visible and highly profiled components of Norway’s assistance to Afghanistan.

A partnership was forged in 2006 with the then Minister of Education, Haneef Atmar, who had worked for the Norwegian Church Aid in Afghanistan during the 1990s and, in fact, had accompanied Egeland on his visit in 1997. With Atmar at the helm of Education, and the Norwegian government in a *taktskifte* modus, an ambitious plan to develop the school sector in Faryab took shape. As the ambassador to Afghanistan at the time, Jan-Erik Leikvang, later recalled:

Our plan was for the Norwegian Refugee Council to build the schools; they would be expensive but nice. Atmar objected: “We can build them less expensively. Together we can make Faryab a model province in education.” Norway would pay 70% of the costs. Soon we were talking about a program of 100 million NOK over 3 years. The Minister of Education would build and the local communities would run them. Støre was very interested and supportive. He said the early plans should be expanded to include 120 schools. We started immediately. But then Atmar left Education to become Minister of the Interior, and things slowed down.²⁶

An agreement to build 80 schools, with financing for teacher salaries and materials included was signed in 2007.²⁷ In 2011, Norway agreed to finance ten new schools in the provincial capital Maymana. All would be open to girls, and some apparently exclusively so. The government thus had good reason to showcase its contribution to educational development of women, though the side-effect of justifying an increasingly unpopular war was obvious.

1.3 Don’t abandon the women: 2010 -

At the end of the decade, the framework for the Norwegian engagement in Afghanistan changed. Withdrawal of international combat troops, first announced at the NATO summit in Lisbon in November 2010, was scheduled to start in 2012 and be completed by the end of 2014. At the same time, the international coalition and the Afghan government started searching for openings to negotiate a political settlement with the Taliban. The new development alarmed many in the rights and aid community who feared that support for women’s rights would be among the first casualties in talks with the Taliban, and, more generally, that the withdrawal of military forces signalled an overall disengagement by the international aid community that would have repercussions on aid programs.

Reports by international organizations that documented the conditions of women provided ammunition for the activists. In 2010, a report from Care (International) showed that Afghanistan topped a list of the 10 worst countries in the world for women to live. A decade after a massive international engagement designed to stabilize the country and improve the lives of the population, there was still a very long way to go for women.²⁸ In 2011, when the international coalition and the donor community assembled in Bonn to discuss future troop withdrawals and greater Afghan self-reliance in the security sector, two major international NGOs were prepared.

²⁶ Author’s interview with Leikvang, 12.01.2015.

²⁷ Rønne, *op.cit.*

²⁸ Reported in Torild Skogsholm, “Bistand drevet av håpløshet?”, *Klassekampen* 8 april 2011.
<http://www.care.no/Global/Aktuelt/Dokumenter%20til%20nedlasting/Kronikk%20fra%20CARE%20om%20norsk%20bistand%20Afghanistan.pdf>.

A report by Oxfam stressed the importance of including women in any future talks with the Taliban. Ten years of relative gains could be lost if women's rights were bartered for peace with the Taliban, and if Afghan women were not included in the negotiations, the authors warned. Western leaders had a particular moral responsibility in this regard, "not least because protection of women's rights was sold as a positive outcome of the international intervention in October 2001."²⁹ Action Aid pursued a similar line of advocacy. The international community had both a general and a specific obligation to Afghan women, it claimed, the latter arising from the way in which US and its allies invoked the rights of Afghan women to justify the invasion and removal of the Taliban regime.³⁰

The Norwegian media gave generous space to these messages and parallel efforts by Norwegian rights and aid activists. Some, though not all, NGOs used the opportunity to criticize the Norwegian aid program. The head of Care/Norway wrote in the daily *Klassekampen* that a main reason why Afghanistan topped the list of the world's 10 worst countries to live in for women was the faulty aid strategy pursued to date – too timid and cautious to produce results.

We see in Afghanistan today that result-oriented action tends to be replaced with politically correct appropriations, seminars and strategy documents. Almost all appropriations earmarked by Norway to support Afghan women go to the UN Fund for Women, UN WOMEN. To give money through the UN appears as a safe approach, but UN Women has limited capacity in Afghanistan..... A larger proportion of the aid to Afghanistan should be in the form of direct support to build an organized movement of Afghan women with the skills to demand that their rights are met. The Afghan government can resist half-hearted foreign pressure, but it cannot easily ignore a strong political movement in its own country. The broader the movement that mobilizes for women's rights in Afghanistan, the more difficult it will be for conservative Afghans to say that equality is a foreign idea imposed from the outside. This will make it easier to continue the struggle for women's rights after Western forces have withdrawn and many aid organizations probably have reduced their presence.³¹

Other NGOs were more concerned with the amount being appropriated. A strong advocacy organization that also provides aid, The Norwegian Afghanistan Committee, chose to highlight the need for more assistance targeted towards maternal health. Noting its own work in training Afghan midwives, the head of the Committee's Women's Section teamed up with the head of the Norwegian Midwives Association to demand the government give priority in financing programs for maternal health.³²

The center-left government had affirmed during the preparation for the 2014 transition that aid would stay around 750 mill NOK annually even though most Norwegian troops would be withdrawn. Within this aid program, support for women would be targeted through specific programs and, adding a cross-cutting dimension, the government determined that women's rights and equality would be integrated throughout Norway's projects. The center-right government that took over after the elections in September 2013 stayed this course, adding new projects to demonstrate its commitment. A large government-sponsored conference on aid and the rights of Afghan women was held in Oslo in 2014 with prominent, official participation from the US and the UK, as well as from Afghanistan. Given that the US at the time was rolling out a new, very large program for aiding Afghan women, the

²⁹ <http://www.oxfamamerica.org/press/ten-years-of-gains-for-afghan-women-under-threat-warns-oxfam/>

³⁰ <http://www.actionaid.org/publications/just-peace-legacy-war-women-afghanistan>.

³¹ Skogsholm, *op.cit.* note 27.

³² Sandra Petersen og Trude Thommesen, "Det er et paradoks at Norge unnlater å engasjere seg i basale kvinneverettigheter i Afghanistan", *Dagsavisen* 8.03.2012. At: http://nyemeningen.no/alle_meninger/cat1003/subcat1015/thread242489/#post_242489

Oslo-conference was in part an expression of official Norwegian support for the US role in Afghanistan in this area, and as such another piece in a larger mosaic that demonstrated solidarity with the country's major ally.³³

As the 2014 transition neared, so did concern that Afghan women's rights might be exchanged in a bargain for peace. The seminal UN Res. 1325, adopted in 2000, which called for women's participation in peace processes, assumed its rightful place in this discussion. In preparation for the Bonn 2011 meeting to discuss "the transition", for instance, Care /Norway had collected signatures for an appeal to the government to support Afghan women's participation in Bonn. The government repeatedly assured that it was fully in accord, both with respect to talks on the transition and possible peace negotiations. "Involving women and respecting their rights was a politically stated requirement," a foreign affairs official who had served both in Afghanistan and as NATO's first Special Representative for Women, Peace and Security, Marit Skåre, later said.³⁴

As part of its general peace diplomacy and in line with Res.1325, the Norwegian government had worked behind the scenes to facilitate contact between the Taliban and the government. In early 2015, some tangible evidence of success was made public with the news that two prominent Afghan women parliamentarians, Fawzia Koofi og Shukria Barakzai, had met with Taliban representatives in face-to-face talks in Oslo. The move was applauded by Norwegian aid, rights and peace activists working for Afghanistan. Three of them joined forces to make the point in an op-ed published by the Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation:

The rights of women have all along been a controversial question, and there has been fear that they would be sacrificed in negotiations with Taliban. The fact that Afghan female politicians and Taliban now are talking together, shows that it is possible to change attitudes and actions over time. That they meet face-to-face is in itself an important step forward. Informal talks and secret meetings like these are important for subsequent substantive talks.³⁵

1.4 How much aid for Afghan women?

Norwegian development assistance to Afghanistan averaged about 470 million NOK annually in the period 2002-2007, before settling into a steady pattern of about 730 million annually.³⁶ How much of this has gone to support women, is largely a definitional matter. The government claims that of total aid in 2001-2013, amounting to the equivalent of 1.218 billion USD, 35% has gone to projects with gender equality as the principal objective, and another 6% to projects where gender equality was an important (secondary) objective.³⁷ Insofar as gender equality in 2009 was incorporated as a cross-cutting measure throughout the aid program, it seems plausible that one-third of the aid projects could be said to have this as a principal objective.

Projects and programs specifically and more narrowly targeted towards Afghan women constituted only a very small part of the total aid program. Some 15-20 million NOK a year were allocated from a separate budget line for women's equality. Most of this went to UN WOMEN in Afghanistan.

³³ Norwegian NGOs, by contrast, criticized the size and top-down structure of the program, claiming it was unlikely to mobilize Afghans in a sustainable process. Interviews with author during the Oslo conference.

³⁴ In interview with author, 19 May 2015.

³⁵ "Små skritt mot fred i Afghanistan," by Liv Kjølsest and Heidi Sofie Kvanvig, of the Norwegian Afghanistan Committee, and Norunn Grande of the Nansen Peace Center, *NRK Ytring*, 14 June 2015.

³⁶ <http://www.norad.no/om-bistand/norsk-bistand-i-tall/>

³⁷ Norwegian development cooperation with Afghanistan – The gender perspective. Oslo, MFA, 21.11.2014, p.1.

Calculations based on allocations from this budget line and a budget post for support to women's organizations show that 2-5 percent of the total aid to Afghanistan was targeted towards women's rights and women's organizations in the 2008-2013 period.³⁸

2 Views from inside

2.1 Perspectives from the field

To capture some of the variations in perspectives from Norwegian aid workers and other officials in the field, this section starts with interviews with two persons of somewhat different backgrounds. Both are women, but one is young while the other is actually a grandmother (as a Norwegian newspaper noted in a story on her job). The younger woman had worked for the UN on gender, peace and security issues as well as for a Norwegian NGO before signing on as a development advisor to the embassy in Kabul. The older woman had worked for many years for the same NGOs in several conflict areas. Both agreed to be identified by name

Toiko Kleppe had work experience from the UN and in the Norwegian NGO FOKUS when she wanted to go to the field to see what gendered assistance meant in practice. She was based at the PRT in Maimana, the provincial capital of Faryab, and worked as a development adviser for the Norwegian embassy as one of the few civilians in the military camp. This involved responsibility for overseeing projects and coordination with NGOs, other donors and the military. She also spent part of her time in Kabul, where she assisted the embassy's work on women's issues and gender equality.

Looking back, she sees achievements. Some projects run by Norwegian NGOs seemed particularly beneficial for women. Although she could only visit a limited number of projects due to the security situation, in her discussions with NGOs and others, midwife training and solar panels were often highlighted. Training Afghan midwives was about more than infrastructure in health; it gave the women an area of authority and a greater public role. Solar panels carried a larger lesson about usefully integrating gender perspectives in aid projects. In households where such panels were installed, women gained a few extra hours of light for work or study. The beneficial influence of aid could also flow in curious ways, she notes.

We supported a women's prison in Maimana. I was not an expert on prisons, but the physical conditions looked good – they were clean and relatively spacious, and infinitely better than the male prison, which looked like living hell. The prison director praised the Norwegian support and said that due to this aid, he had learnt not to beat the prisoners. When I asked what had convinced him that violence towards the inmates was not a good practice, he said “the Norwegians who were here were so nice, and they said it was wrong.”

In the larger picture of things, the constraints, the difficulties and the enormity of the task loomed large.

Aid to women was important in principle, but few of us understood what it meant in practice in Afghanistan, even if we had worked with gender issues before.

We tried to ask, “what do Afghan women really need and want and how can we help them get that?” We organized many meetings with women in Maimana and in Kabul to hear their point of view, but

³⁸ Budget line 168 (women's equality) and 70 (women's equality organisations and institutions). Author's calculation of data taken from <http://www.norad.no/om-bistand/norsk-bistand-i-tall/>

getting a broad representation was hard. The focus was often the concerns of the educated and well-to-do women, issues such as better internet access and dormitory for women at universities. So, lacking a better understanding, a project's "gender face" became important. For example, Norway was financing the construction of an assembly hall in Maimana. Then the question arose: How would women be accommodated here? A separate section? Or a separate hall? The more basic question was whether this really was something the women of Maimana needed in the first place.

In at least one case, it appears that question was not asked. Around 2006, soon after the Norwegians took over the PRT in Maimana, the PRT built a public shelter for women.

It was a disaster. People accused the women seeking shelter there of being prostitutes.³⁹ Only the most desperate women went there. It even had a big sign saying it was built by the Norwegian military forces; at least we got that sign removed. We had by then learnt something about the danger of having a high profile in these matters



Photo: Petter Bauck

³⁹ The sign announced in capital letters that the shelter had been funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Defense and built by the PRT in November-December 2006. After 2001, foreign NGOs had built shelters for women in several Afghan cities. The shelters provoked strong reactions from conservative segments of the society, being viewed as a threat to the Afghan family (by supporting women who 'ran away') and the social, patriarchal hierarchy, and as a foreign imposition on Afghan society. The reactions led to efforts by the government in 2011 to take over the centers. See Alissa J. Rubin, "A Thin Line of Defense Against 'Honor Killings'", *New York Times*, 3 March 2015.

There was a lot of discussion at the embassy about the purpose of spending the money, and evaluations were a useful stimulus for discussion. But in the end money – the amount of money – became the measure. It was part of the political game. Most of us agreed that we should have given less money, but there was political pressure from home to show that civilian aid equalled military aid. The Afghan administration didn't have the capacity to absorb all the funds, and most of the NGOs were already overloaded with work.

Was building girls' schools a political alibi for the war?

Not necessarily. But we didn't have the tools to ensure that the schools led to the desired empowerment of girls. That does not mean, of course, that the schools were useless. I saw a number of girls' schools up and running. Their use and impact over time depended on other things. Building a school and saying it is a girls' school does not in itself make it so. If the girls don't go there because there is poor security, or because there are no female teachers, because they don't want to be there because they are afraid, then it becomes just a school or just a building. It is not a girls' school anymore.

But there was so little time to think, to learn and to understand. You had the feeling that you could never do things well enough in such a short time. High turn-over of staff was a huge challenge across the board. We whirled in to help Afghan government agencies do their job, to encourage the nation building process, - each of us for a few months or sometimes longer. Many of us were young, enthusiastic and relatively inexperienced Westerners who of course only understood a fraction of the many lines of conflict and layers of loyalties.

By the time Toiko arrived in Maimana, the security situation had deteriorated to the point that she could rarely go out to see projects and consult with implementing NGOs and beneficiaries.

If I had gone with a military escort and knocked on the door of an Afghan NGO, this would create a potential security problem for them. If I were to go without an escort, I needed security clearance from both the embassy and the PRT. The security situation was so bad that I almost never got to go outside of Maimana.

This is a general problem. We didn't know much about how projects worked in practice because we could not, for security reasons, visit most of them. We had to rely on second hand information, and we don't know how reliable that was. For instance, we had not seen all of the schools Norway has built in Afghanistan. We were told that some were functioning, that some were not, rumours had it that the Taliban were using some as meeting places – was it true? We don't know.⁴⁰ Of course, all donors had the same problem of restricted access due to the security situation, including the World Bank, which has a major responsibility for aid to Afghanistan.

Efforts to integrate gender dimensions in PRT operations met with several obstacles. The military often had little time for this, little knowledge of what it meant, few if any tools to make it a meaningful task, and the military culture was not always receptive. Yet good leadership could cut through and make a difference

One PRT leader said, "I don't have the time for this." Another leader handled it differently. He was fantastic. He would say, "this is not just about equality, it is about military effectiveness. It is much

⁴⁰ A report in a journal published by NORAD made a similar point, noting Afghan official statements to the effect that enrollment figures were uncertain and could have been falsified. The same uncertainty applied to official data on health clinics. Tor Aksel Bolle, "Frykt for juks med skole-og helsetall i Afghanistan," *Bistandsaktuelt*, 3 September 2015. <http://www.bistandsaktuelt.no/nyheter/2015/frykt-for-afghansk-tall-juks/>

better for the operation if we speak to the women as well and understand their perspective in relation to the Taliban's position."⁴¹ With time official Female Engagement teams⁴² were established, but for a long period the PRT did not have enough FET officers. Women who were on the base in another capacity at times joined the military observation teams on patrol so they could talk to the women.

More fundamentally, the question is: What have we really achieved so far? Could we have done more for Afghan women if we had been less preoccupied with saving political face at home? A small but strong core of Afghan women became our best friends. We showed some of them to the world to see. We took Afghan feminism and made it our own. Now some of these women are accused of being spies for the West. Thanks to us, they now have very little space for action. Some are desperate to leave the country.

There were more ironies. Some of the female local staff at the Embassy in Kabul had been trained as medical professionals, but had opted to do administrative work in the international sector because their secretarial salary was much higher than if they had worked in their medical professions in Afghanistan.

Imagine how many Afghan doctors and midwives and other professionals were absorbed by the international agencies and diplomatic missions in Afghanistan. How utterly distortive our presence was in this regard. We discussed this sometimes at the embassy, but what could we do?

Liv Steimoeggen has been country representative for Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) for the last three years. She previously worked for NCA in Vietnam and the Middle East.

Discussing NCAs activities in Afghanistan, she points to situational constraints, noting that the NCA's local organization mirrors society as whole. For instance, she would have liked to have an equal proportion of women and men among the local staff, but only has a 20-80 ratio.

Getting women to work for us is a challenge. Our projects are mostly in the countryside, and there are security and family constraints on women travelling outside the home and the office. Their reputation in the local community may be at risk if they travel without a male relative accompanying her. In Uruzgan, we heard of a mullah saying that just mentioning the name of a woman was a form of abuse. The situation of women in Kabul is different. Nevertheless, we manage to do several things.⁴³ In our current peacebuilding program for religious actors, we brought in 40 mullahs from all over the country, but also succeeded in recruiting 10 women. They are from the main cities, Kabul, Mazar and Herat, but also outside. It was difficult to get female participants. It was too sensitive.

Why was it so sensitive?

For the women's part, probably because it implied reduced family and social control over their lives. For a start, it meant going to Kabul for an initial training week. Here men and women would be working together in groups. The women would have to prepare an action plan for peacebuilding to be

⁴¹ Towards the end of the decade, this had become standard COIN-principle, promoted by the ISAF command.

⁴² Female Engagement Teams (FET) developed from the COIN principle that the military had to win the confidence of the population, and that Afghan women, as 50 percent of the population, should be approached for this purpose by special teams of female soldiers in the ISAF forces. US and UK forces took the lead in establishing FETs. For a review of FETs in theory and practice, see Sippi Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, *Seeking out their Afghan sisters: Female Engagement Teams in Afghanistan*. Chr. Michelsen Institute, Working Paper 1, 2014.

⁴³ NCA is one of the largest Norwegian NGOs operating in Afghanistan, with projects in three provinces and an annual budget of around 40 million NOK at the time of this conversation.

implemented in their local communities. They would travel overseas to a seminar (Malaysia or Turkey), and be at a concluding conference in Kabul. Initially, all the women had to travel with a proper male escort ("mahram"). Since it was difficult to persuade our funder to finance this, we eventually succeeded in having 4 out of 5 women travel with NCA staff acting as trusted mahrams.

During both the workshop and subsequent activities the issue of gender came up, and we had to work around it. On the first day of the workshop, one mullah made an initial declaration, saying he could not work in the same room as women. Other mullahs were more open and acted as mediators. On the last day of the workshop the same mullah who wanted the women out of the room stood up and supported ideas coming from the women's group. The women were surprised to experience the positive change in the mullah's attitude towards women.

Was the foreign sponsorship an issue for the participants in the program?

Afghans would assume that a program like this had foreign sponsorship. We did not advertise it, but we did not hide it. The financing came from the British embassy, and embassy officials came and went during the workshops and related activities. Two of the facilitators were Irish. I was there on the third day and on the overseas seminars. After the initial scepticism I felt I was accepted and the presence of foreigners didn't seem to be a problem. The participants developed a deep relationship to the two Irish facilitators, who were even invited to become Muslims.

What do the participants learn in this program?

Leadership, conflict management and peacebuilding. There are peace councils on the province level, including in the three provinces where we work, and we have established local peace shuras. Our ambition is that the participants will link up with these structures and perhaps also on the national level. Peace is much more than the relationship between the government and the Taliban. There is conflict over water and land, among tribal communities and among rival commanders; these local level conflicts often feed into the bigger political picture. We want to enable people to deal with such local conflicts without resorting to violence. That is why it is important to involve women.

NCA is working on long-term development, humanitarian assistance and advocacy. None of these activities is targeted towards women only, but gender perspectives are integrated in all programs, sometimes with specific sub-component (e.g. women's poultry-raising in a livelihood project). NCA has chosen not to run programs designed to strengthen women's rights directly, e.g., through empowerment or advocacy projects.

This has been an organizational choice. You can't go in and just preach about women's rights. That doesn't mean that we don't take issues such as violence against women seriously. In our peacebuilding workshop in Kabul, for instance, one of the working groups of women - the women of course formed a separate group - came up with domestic violence as a pressing issue and presented it to the mullahs. But the question is how to deal with that. We believe in working broadly through literacy programs and economic empowerment, including components of women's rights in literacy programs. That will increase women's status and power, contributing to their participation and equality. For instance, we have found that where women contribute to the family income, this will increase their status and lower the threshold for what they are permitted to do. You have to offer something, not only software, but also hardware, so to speak; you have to link questions of women's rights to something concrete, something useful. And of course we have to work with men. Changing women's roles also contributes to changing men's roles.

2.2 Managing the aid

Several themes appeared in the discussion with aid workers and officials, most of them pointed to internal tensions, trade-offs or plain difficulties encountered when managing Norwegian aid designed to promote the equality and participation of Afghan women. They are grouped under five main headings below.

2.2.1 Organizing for rights and advocacy

Whether advocacy and empowerment should be organized as separate projects or integrated in development projects for improved livelihood, is a matter of organizational choice, as the NCA country representative noted. CARE has implemented programs for women's rights and gender equality in Afghanistan since the early 1990s, both as an integrated approach (mainstreaming) in other sector programs, as well as targeted programs for women's rights, such as the women's empowerment program targeting widows and women in a vulnerable situation. Helene Aall Henriksen explains.

CARE's program to assist widows – which includes not only widows but also other women in a vulnerable situation – seeks to build capacity in the form of knowledge and skills in order to empower the participants to improve their situation. The program informs them of their rights - relating to e.g. forced marriage, violence, property rights and inheritance - as they appear in Islam, in the civil law and in human rights principles. CARE works through establishing solidarity groups. In Kabul there are around 12 000 members in such groups. The solidarity group is first and foremost a platform where women can meet outside their home to obtain support from their peers in matters that are important to them, including matters that relate to their rights. Through participation in the solidarity groups, the members gain the tools and confidence needed to claim their rights within their communities, through shuras, or through the formal legal system at the national level, with support from CARE.

CARE has trained local staff to run the program. Virtually the entire staff in Afghanistan are local – both men and women. They have been trained to facilitate the solidarity groups and build the capacity of the members on legal literacy, peacebuilding and leadership skills. Furthermore, CARE has established and maintains a database that includes data on the deprivation of rights of individual members, and assists the members in pursuing their rights through various institutions, whether formal legal or informal justice mechanisms. The database thus provides a unique set of information on the situation of women in Afghanistan that can be used for advocacy purposes by the members themselves. The data is stored, respecting principles of confidentiality and informed consent. CARE's hope is that the solidarity groups will evolve into an independent grassroots movement for women's rights led by the members themselves, and that CARE in the near future can step back and take on more of a mentoring role. But this is difficult and requires a long time-horizon.

Full independence would make the organization more legitimate, but there are many obstacles to this nascent movement. Most of the members do not know how to read and write;⁴⁴ and it is difficult to identify potential leaders who can turn the organisation into an independent movement for women's rights. There are also other challenges. There is a high turn-over of staff. When CARE has trained local staff, the UN or others who can pay higher wages will snap them up. The security situation sometimes makes it impossible for the solidarity groups to meet and we must lie low. CARE's mentorship can therefore provide a sense of safety and security for the solidarity groups – if the

⁴⁴ By 2010-11, an estimated 17% of all Afghan females 15 years and older were literate, with rural rates much below the national average. <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/kabul/education/enhancement-of-literacy-in-afghanistan-ela-program/>

situation becomes politically difficult or dangerous, there is an international organisation backing the groups, and keeping track of the members' whereabouts and safety.

A strategy that aims at structural change is demanding. But the only way to achieve such change is by working at the local level with a bottom-up approach. It is also important to link the local level with a national umbrella organization such as the Afghan Women's Network (AWN). This is difficult. There is a big sociological distance between the AWN, which reflects the urban "bubble", and the grassroots. Competition for funding does not make it easier. (Helene Aall Henriksen, ex-Care/Norway).

The range of difficulties encountered by the social structure and the small pool of professional Afghan women is familiar to other NGOs regardless of core functions.

By comparison, we find operating in Pakistan is so much easier. Pakistan has a sizable middle class, several organizations of professional women, and highly qualified partner organizations that we can work with. (NCA staff in Oslo headquarters).

NGOs that focus on institution building for empowerment and advocacy face another problem. Raising money for these kinds of activity can be difficult compared to projects that have more immediate and tangible outputs.

There is a tendency in the aid business towards performance based evaluations that look at concrete outputs that can be counted and held up as results, often within short project and budget cycles. For organizations with a strong advocacy function like FOKUS, this is a concern.⁴⁵ An important part of our work is advocacy, both through liaising with women's organizations in developing countries, and in relation to Norwegian policy. In the case of Afghanistan, it is important to carefully monitor official Norwegian policy rhetoric - which is very strong and affirmative on principle - to ensure that the government lives up to its words regarding the Action Plan, Resolution 1325 and the aid program. This is particularly important because women's rights at various times have been used to legitimize policy in Afghanistan.

However, getting funding for advocacy and monitoring activities is difficult. For instance, until this year, we also had a long-standing development project in Afghanistan to train midwives, but we are no longer funded for this. An in-country project of this kind provides local knowledge, contacts and administrative capacity that are important for our advocacy and monitoring function. (Sissel Thorsdalen, FOKUS).

2.2.2 Spending the money effectively

Slightly over half of Norwegian assistance to Afghanistan since 2001 has been channeled through multilateral organizations or trust funds,⁴⁶ principally the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund (ARTF) administered by the World Bank,⁴⁷ the UNDP and UN Women.⁴⁸ The ARTF is by virtue of

⁴⁵ FOKUS is an umbrella organization of Norwegian women's committees and organizations working to support the rights of women in international development. It has 66 member organizations.

⁴⁶ The figure for 2000-2014 is 52%. <http://www.norad.no/om-bistand/norsk-bistand-i-tall/>

⁴⁷ Norway supported the ARTF from the start and was involved in negotiations establishing the fund in 2002. This partly arose out of Norway's role in the late 1990s as head of the Afghan Support Group, which had a coordinating role for humanitarian assistance during the Taliban period. About half of the ARTF goes to budget support for the Afghan government, the rest to various programs.

its size alone a critically important development assistance program in the country. How does it rate in terms of gender perspective?

The Bank's approach to women rights in Afghanistan is very poor. They needed lots and lots of pushing. We – the Nordics - took the initiative to establish a Gender Working Group within the ARTF to move things forward, but it had little effect. The Bank used the Group as an excuse to do nothing, rather than to integrate the gender perspective systematically and effectively in its own routines and reporting. We found this very, very off-putting. It is not the job of the donors to ensure that the Bank works according to standards.

The Bank must make sure women are involved in the formulation and implementation of programs. The Bank as an organization must work systematically to integrate and report on this. That means, for instance, including measures of women's rights in evaluation baselines so there is something to report on. The whole question has to be addressed on senior levels in the organization and has to be integrated in the system. Gender perspectives must be more than just a scorecard with indicators, boxes that can be ticked off and forgotten. (Embassy official #3).

In one of the Bank's assessment of its flagship program - the NSP⁴⁹ - the consultant hired to do the survey did not even have any female interviewers because the study was insufficiently resourced by the Bank. (Embassy official # 4).

The World Bank claims to know what is going on in all their NSP projects, but they cannot possibly know. When I was there, the Bank had 8 staff supposedly monitoring projects in Afghanistan, but they had even stricter security regulations than I had for going to the field. All they got was second-hand information. Still, Norway gives a lot of money to the ARTF because it is easier to say that the Bank knows how that money is used and can vouch for the results."(Embassy official # 5.)⁵⁰

Aid channelled through UN Women was viewed critically as well, though for different reasons.⁵¹

UNW has not been acting strategically to define and set policy. We need to think about how UNW can be strengthened in this regard. (Embassy official #3)

UNW seems not to be very accessible. They should develop stronger relations with local organizations of Afghan women and support them vis-a-vis Afghan authorities. (NGO staff)

Part of UNW's role is to mainstream gender issues in the government departments. But the foundation of this work is missing. There is only a very thin layer of skills and competence among the female population of Afghanistan. UNW is working to construct the top floor of a house when the

⁴⁸ UN Women was established in 2010 by resolution of the UN General Assembly, which merged four previously distinct parts of the UN system that focused on gender equality and women's empowerment.

⁴⁹ The National Solidarity Program, the flagship program of the Bank in Afghanistan, was established in 2003 and finances community development projects. When Phase II of the program ended in 2011, it had provided block grants to over 23 000 communities, about half of the total number of communities to be covered by the scheme. <http://www.nspafghanistan.org/default.aspx?sel=109>

⁵⁰ An external evaluation of the ARTF in 2008 found inadequate monitoring of results. *Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund. External Evaluation. Final Report*, Oslo: Scanteam. August 2008. At http://www.artf.af/images/uploads/ARTF_External_Review_2008.pdf

⁵¹ For a formal review of UNWomen undertaken by NORAD, see <http://www.norad.no/om-bistand/publikasjon/2011/gender-review-report-royal-norwegian-embassy-afghanistan/>

foundation is missing. Establishing the foundation means reducing illiteracy, strengthening professional education, and so on. As it is now, a lot of money going to UNW is wasted, but we continue to allocate a lot of money to them because it is the UN – and the UN is important to Norway – and because women are important, and because we want to engage as an important donor where we, for internal reasons more than external, can leave a Norwegian footprint. Channeling money through the UN also has advantages from a corruption perspective. It means that the responsibility for follow-up on financial and management aspects of projects rests with the UN and not us. (Vigdis Kjelseth, Norwegian Embassy, Kabul)

Using relevant criteria for assessing the effectiveness of aid was a recurrent theme.

The political leadership at home is focusing on numbers - on quantity rather than quality. The number of schools and number of girls' schools are endlessly cited. But what kind of education do these girls actually get in school? That is the question we need to ask. When we do, we find many of the answers are disappointing. The same applies to the health sector. We cite the large and growing number of health centers that have been established since 2001 as a measure of how much has been done. But what does it mean? What kind of equipment do these centers have? Can they put a cast on the broken foot of a child if needed? Not many of them can. We need to look beyond the statistics and ask what they mean. (Vigdis Kjelseth, Embassy/Kabul)

The tendency to cite the number of female police officers as evidence of progress was also brought up.

Norway has allocated a great deal of money to LOTFA⁵² to support payment of police salaries and police reform. Getting women into the police force is taken as a measure of success for both police reforms and women's rights. Then we see that that female police officers are harassed and some are killed because they are in this role. We are making demands on Afghan women, but we have not done our homework on this. We have not analyzed the challenges that an increase in female police officers entail and initiated the necessary measures to counter abuse and neglect. The attitudes in the male-dominated police corps will be an important issue to work on here. (Petter Bauck, NORAD).

How do the women actually manage in the police force? What kind of problems do they face? What does it mean for them and their families? What does the presence of female police officers mean for changing attitudes in the local community? These are the questions we need to look at. (Embassy official # 3)

2.2.3 Our priorities or theirs?

The Norwegian 2007 White Paper set out, in bold language, the government's responsibility to promote women's rights in its development assistance policy: "Norway shall speak out where others find it easier to be silent."⁵³ Several years later, this echoed strongly in talks with embassy officials and aid workers.

For progress to take place, some women must work in the front lines to show the way for other women, even if the society is not ready for it. We need to work on attitudes as well to strike a balance between pushing women along and creating an enabling environment. To have targets for the number of women in the police force, for instance, is not necessarily helpful if the women only make tea. Yet we tend to forget how long our own progress has taken, and we still have a way to go in Norway as

⁵² The UNDP administered trust fund, Law and Order Trust Fund for Afghanistan.

⁵³ *På Like Vilkår*, p. 6. se note 1 above.

well. Many Norwegian delegations come to Afghanistan with only men. It is shameful. And when will we get our first female Ambassador to Kabul? (Embassy official # 3)

We have to recognize and respect the framework of tradition and religion, but cultural relativism? Absolutely not. We need to put that behind us. Afghan women do not want to be repressed. (NGO-worker).

Close involvement in Afghanistan for more than a decade has strengthened such views.

The more knowledge we gained about the difficult situation of Afghan women, the stronger was the argument for doing something. The political situation at home made it easier for that argument to be heard because a large majority in the Parliament supported aid for development and democratization in Afghanistan, if not necessarily our military engagement. Support for women made it easier to sell our involvement as a whole. (Vigdis Kjelseth, Embassy/Kabul)

Prolonged and close involvement also increased the awareness of the enormous complexities of accelerated social change in the midst of war, and, brought with it a measure of caution and openness to compromises that could soften the divisions.

“We have to realize that if we push ahead too fast and too far on issues involving women’s rights, we will lose confidence among the local population. We have to tread carefully. The Afghan NGOs we work with are very important here: they have good local knowledge, they are able to develop confidence in the local population and broker compromises. (Embassy official # 4)

We continuously face questions for which we do not have clear answers. Their priorities or ours? Can we support things that would not look good in the light of day at home? Alternatively, what right do we have to promote causes in Afghanistan that are important to us? Can we buy us the right to dictate? The rule of thumb is to not support bad projects, but how far can we go in supporting things we would like to see? (Vigdis Kjelseth, Embassy/Kabul).

Girls’ schools seemed safe but also here, compromises were forged. Norway’s program for school construction in Faryab, implemented by a Danish NGO, DAART (Danish Assistance to Afghan Rehabilitation and Technical Training), is a case in point. At the outset, it appears, the Afghan government did not specifically ask for girls’ schools, nor did the agreement specify that.

Somewhere along the process – I do not know exactly where and how, these processes are complicated – it became clear that the schools would have to admit girls. This meant, for instance, building a proper wall around the school compound and separate toilet facilities for girls. And since it was culturally difficult for boys and girls to attend at the same time, a typical compromise was to have shifts whereby girls and boys attended school at different times. Some of the schools we support in Faryab have 3 shifts. The NGOs we work with are good interlocutors with the local community to work out compromises in matters such as these. (Embassy official #4) ”⁵⁴

⁵⁴ This arrangement also makes possible to describe them as girls’ schools. The Norwegian government announced the opening of one school in this program with the headline: “A Norwegian supported school for girls in Faryab province in northern Afghanistan was recently opened amidst enthusiastic support from the local population. https://www.regjeringen.no/nb/aktuelt/skole_afghanistan/id2341666/

The term “Afghan women” of course conceals a rich diversity – urban vs rural, wider socio-economic divisions, and local, ethnic and sectarian identities. What were the implications of this for programs designed to assist “Afghan women”?

We tended to talk to the same few women in the same little bubble; those who spoke English and lived in a world separate – perhaps “artificial” world – away from the bulk of the Afghan women. How could we reach “the other women”, and could they reach us? Let me give you one example. One Afghan civil society group with a visible religious profile tried to approach a foreign donor, but as they were heavily covered, they met closed doors. Donors did not want to support these kinds of Afghan women (Embassy official # 7).

We often spoke about this bubble. We wanted to export our values, and we did it through a few women activists “in the bubble”. Looking to the future, we asked ourselves: what happens to those in the bubble when we leave, or if the male power structure or the conservatives become more powerful? Will they come to us as asylum seekers? Or will they be frustrated and unable to work? Will they become vulnerable? Does this mean we should compromise on our values and not flag them? I don’t have any clear answers for you. It is so much easier in other countries where I have worked and where the structure of male power is less pronounced (Embassy official #7).

Within the bubble, there are divisions as well. An embassy official noted that local female staff at the embassy were itself divided on issues of women’s rights. Others stressed the need to develop networks in the rural areas.

The most egregious mistake in our aid program was to ally ourselves with a limited urban constituency. What networks do we have outside Kabul? With women that don’t speak English? Yes, the elite is central, but we must win support outside if we are to succeed. For instance, the Norwegian financing of a public women’s shelter in Faryab – with a huge sign outside saying it was built by Norwegian soldiers – was a remarkably thoughtless and badly informed project. (Petter Bauck, NORAD)

Bruising battles over legislative initiatives affecting women's rights introduced in the second half of the decade revealed deep political and social divisions.⁵⁵ In these cases, the principal Western donors in Afghanistan, including Norway, lined up in clear support for “the progressive” side. A case where no Afghan women activists lined up with a Western definition of “progressive” proved more difficult. This happened in October 2014 when 5 men accused of gang-raping several women were executed.

The women activists celebrated when the five were hanged. They regarded it as the best thing that had happened in years for the liberation of Afghan women. One reason was that the men were found guilty of rape – that is, unlike the more common situation when the victim is found guilty of adultery. But we choked. We oppose the death penalty on principle, and in this case there had been no due process in the trial. The UN and the entire Western diplomatic corps called on the government to postpone the executions because the trial had been farcical [lasting only a few hours], and the defendants did not have proper legal defense. But we did not manage to say “Yes – but...” to the Afghan women rights activist.

⁵⁵ The two main cases were the Elimination of Violence against Afghan Women (EVAW) law, and the Shia Personal Status Law. See Torunn Wimpelmann Chaudhary, Orzala Ashraf Nemat and Astri Suhrke, “Promoting Women's Rights in Afghanistan: The Ambiguous Footprint of the West,” in Susanna Campbell, David Chandler and Meera Sabaratnam: *A Liberal Peace? The Problems and Practices of Peacebuilding*. London, New York: Zed Books, 2011.

The activists considered the death penalty as the only guarantee of punishment since, given the state of the Afghan legal system, the offenders could easily buy themselves out of a jail sentence, even a life sentence. In other words, the underlying problem is the state of the legal system. There was also a lot of popular engagement and interest in this case. The victims had been part of a group returning from a wedding. The women said they recognized the men. The trial was televised. So Karzai signed the death warrants and Ashraf Ghani, who took over as president soon afterwards, did not commute the sentences (Vigdis Kjelseth, Embassy/Kabul).

2.2.4 Maximizing impact

The starting point, officials with long in-country experience emphasized, must be realistic expectations about our impact.

We have to recognize that Norway is a small actor in Afghanistan, politically as well as in the aid sector. We may look “big on aid” if measured per capita, we like to think that we are, and we prefer to compare ourselves with other like-minded donors in Europe. In reality we are quite small here compared to other international actors, including the UN and non-Western donors, above all Iran and India. (Vigdis Kjelseth, Embassy/Kabul).

The new structure for donor coordination established by Ashraf Ghani underlines the point:

It is a 5+3 structure, where the 5 are the big donors - the US, UK, Germany, EU and Japan, and the 3 are Canada, Australia and Nordic+ (Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Finland and the Netherlands). This is more manageable for the government, but for us it means less direct access. Now our embassy staff has been reduced as well, the embassy itself has been relocated to the Danish compound, and the aid program is managed in Oslo. This means further distance. We have cut to the bone, but have to make the best of it. And within the Nordic+ group we can emphasize human rights and gender perspectives in the discussions with the government and other donors. (Embassy official # 3)

Lack of funds seems not to have been an issue.

The main problem with assistance to Afghanistan is not lack of money. If anything, there has been too much money. But we can't expect results overnight. How we operate is more important - how we push, how strategically we work, and whether we have an effective strategy. Integrating gender perspectives across the board as a normal condition of aid does not require a lot of money. It requires women, and network of women and men who want to do something. It means role models, such as more women in the Parliament. It means making demands on our partners, forcing them to be creative. Norwegian NGOs are good in this respect; some have developed exciting projects. (Embassy official # 3)

By 2015 Norway's development cooperation with Afghanistan was regulated by six large agreements. Some embassy officials felt that aid was on “autopilot”.

Agreements are made for multiyear commitments, with little opportunity to change direction in between. The ARTF, for instance, goes for 3 years. We can only change small things at the embassy level (Embassy official #6).

The tendency in our Afghanistan portfolio has been towards fewer and larger programs, and much of it goes through multilateral channels. One reason for this is that we have more leverage as active players in the multilateral aid system than if we manage all the programs ourselves. This means we have to select out smaller but good projects, which is problematic. Some of the best projects that we

have for women – and which we continue to support – are small, such as schools training Afghan midwives. That is money well spent. (Vigdis Kjelseth, Embassy/Kabul)

Training midwives is an excellent program because it is about more than health infrastructure. Here we help women to gain a higher status in society, to act as a role model, and to be an agent in the change of attitudes in the community. (Toiko Kleppe, Embassy/Kabul).

Impact can also be enhanced through better organization of our own bureaucratic processes. Take the case of the Action Plan for implementation of Res. 1325.

The Afghan Action Plan for 1325 is now sitting on Ashraf Ghani's desk. UN Women is out of the loop. We are afraid the Afghan plan will be long on intentions and short on strategy. But we have to hold the Afghan government up to the standards it has itself formally endorsed. That is where we need to push.

At present our approach is fragmented and therefore not very effective. There is no coherent strategy which lays out what the different parts of the government that have responsibilities in Afghanistan - Defense, Justice, Foreign Affairs and so on – are supposed to do to hold the Afghan government responsible and accountable for its obligations under 1325. It is a stovepipe system – we report in different channels and we operate in different fora.

An integrated approach needs a focal point, possibly in the MFA's South Asia section, that would collect information and develop a strategy for our work in Afghanistan in this area. Such a strategy should identify goals, processes and consequences: this is what we want, this is how we should work, this how we push, these are the consequences of non-compliance, and so on. The strategy should be the blueprint for action in all meetings where gender perspectives in Afghanistan is discussed, in NATO, in the UN, among donors, and in talks with Afghan authorities and civil society That would be a genuine action plan, and it is the only way we can hope to have an impact. (Embassy official #3).

An overall strategy for the aid program also seemed to be lacking.

We had lots of projects but even towards the end of the decade, no coherent strategy for the implementation of women's rights as a cross-cutting issue in Afghanistan. There was no strategy for what we prioritized related to resources, and how to implement it. There was more of a strategy of this kind in the human rights field. And women were sometimes put to work on "women's issues". Perhaps we should have shown that men also can work on women's rights, to give it more visibility in a patriarchal society." (Embassy official #7)

A good strategy requires knowledge about the society in which we operate. Here Norway – as well as the international community as a whole – has been remiss, argued one aid official whose involvement in Afghanistan originated in political activism in the late 1970s.

Policy has been predicated on an almost incredibly limited understanding of Afghanistan: The mujahedin were the big heroes of the 1980s, although for women things were not much better after 1992 with the mujahedin government. Then darkness fell with the Taliban, and did not lift until we came in, it is said. But history was not all dark until replaced by the forces of progress in 2001. Substantial efforts to promote women's rights started much earlier, going back to the late 19th century. Strides were made in the 1920s and continued in many ways. In the 1960s, there were women bus drivers in Kabul! During the PDPA [the communists] it was rapid forward movement, but also reaction.

We need to understand more of this history, what was possible before and why, and the nature of the countermoves. We have to realize that the core opposition to reform historically has been concentrated in tribal and religious circles, although now things are more complicated. In Herat recently I spoke to a family about the elections and women's representation. A young son in the family said that if he saw a picture of his mother on an election poster, he would commit suicide. And this was an enlightened family. We have to tread carefully if we are to make progress. (Petter Bauck, NORAD)

Understanding alone, however, could not have compensated for the basic political constraints that shaped the aid mission.

Perhaps we got off to a wrong start in Afghanistan. The framework for our activities was set by others – and it was in many ways constraining. A bureaucrat can advise on what is sensible and not so sensible to do, but after the political decision is made, we have to apply our craft the best we can. In some respects, we failed here. We did not do enough to systematically build institutions early on, and we worked too slowly. We did not focus effectively on poverty reduction. The explicit political agenda overshadowed the development agenda. What we could bring to the dialogue with the United States seemed more important. In the early phase, that meant contributions to security issues, later on, when the US focused on development aid, we put money on the table. (Embassy official #3)

The West has used Afghanistan to fight essentially other battles, first to bleed the Soviet Union and now to fight “the war on terror”. Our main concern has been to fight these wars, not to improve the lives of Afghans. Security interests have determined our assistance programs. (Petter, NORAD).

3 Women's rights as high politics and low politics, and the role of strategic engagement.

The Taliban's repression of Afghan women ensured that women's rights in Afghanistan entered the “high politics” of international security, riding on the back of the increasing international concern with, and eventual war against, the regime. Afghan women became the symbol and face of that war as “the good war”. This was also the case in Norway.

In Kabul during the early years after 2001, the embassy staff were mainly preoccupied with managing the day-to-day challenges of working in a city in ruins among a largely traumatized people. Aid programs were focused on immediate humanitarian assistance. By mid-decade, development cooperation for reconstruction and institution-building in the field of law and human rights had taken shape, and development for women had come into sharper focus.

Politically, and in terms of communication to the public, women's rights projects had high visibility. Visiting politicians always wanted to see a “women's project” – a school with girls, the women's jail in Faryab and so on. Women's rights were politically interesting and something you could include in your regular political reporting home. (Embassy official #7)

Particular events or abuse of women created headlines and high-level attention. The proposed Shia personal status law, which critics described as legitimizing rape in marriage and pedophilia, was even taken up on the outskirts of a high-level NATO meeting on Afghanistan in 2009.

In other respects, women's rights appeared distinctly as “low politics”.

Even if women's rights constitute a good political "sale's pitch", they are not necessarily career enhancing for those desk officers handling the portfolio. There is seldom "political meat" in it. If your work at the embassy covers women's rights, in a country like Afghanistan it means that you mostly get to meet women, including women parliamentarians. They are few and far between, and mostly not powerful. The portfolio does not take you to meetings with powerful politicians- it does not provide access - which is what you need for good political reporting. Perhaps that's why so few men chose to work in this area. (Embassy official #7).

Women's rights had such a high political profile at home. And it was always central when politicians from home came visiting. Because everybody agreed – and it was taken for granted that women's rights were good and something to be supported – there was nothing much to report on back home.⁵⁶

But in Afghanistan, the subject was highly politicized. The country was deeply divided. Some activists approached it dogmatically. But what could ten strong and articulate Afghan women do? Did support for these women translate into sustainable development? If that was the impression we created, it was a way of fooling visiting Norwegian politicians. (Embassy official # 6)

In this perspective, women's rights were not an attractive field for an embassy staff hoping to make a difference.

Women's rights were already a crowded field when I came to Kabul. All the donors had embraced women's rights. It was incorporated in aid projects and so on. It was "taken" by others. You look for an area where you can do something. In the end, you ask yourself: What can be done? Where can I make a difference? (Embassy official #6)

Another diplomat put the case for engaging strategically over women's rights, arguing that this way you *can* make a difference. Mari Skåre was posted to the embassy in Kabul and later served as Deputy Permanent Representative at the Norwegian Delegation to NATO before she was appointed in 2012 as the NATO Secretary-General's first Special Representative for Women, Peace and Security. The position was established after careful lobbying and financial commitment from the Norwegian government, in itself a demonstration of strategic engagement.

When Skåre arrived at the embassy in Kabul in 2008, she recalls, "high politics" issues dominated. While in one sense women's rights had a high political profile, in programmatic terms the matter was not given attention commensurate with the policy rhetoric.⁵⁷

While gender quality and support to women's rights in Afghanistan was a clear political priority for the Norwegian government, I found there was little analysis and strategic thinking about gender issues in the specific context in which we were working. Support to women's rights has a tendency to be viewed as development assistance – not a political issue. The Afghan political landscape was difficult to understand. Yet the ongoing support to education and health programs was important to improve women's situation and we did seek to give more political visibility to gender issues. We emphasized women's role in society and in politics. This included facilitating platforms to give voice and visibility to Afghan women's and human rights organizations, facilitating discussions with female parliamentarians, and taking gender issues and women's rights to discussions in the context of ISAF

⁵⁶ An evaluation by NORAD and SIDA of gender perspectives in Norway's and Sweden's development cooperation in Afghanistan found that gender perspectives were underreported. *Gender Review. Royal Norwegian Embassy, Afghanistan*. NORAD, 14/2011.

⁵⁷ The following statements are the personal opinions of Skåre and do not necessarily reflect the positions of the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

and NATO. UN Security Council Res. 1325 was an important tool for promoting strategies that recognized the political importance of including women in decision-making.

Our approach to gender issues in Afghanistan was more forward leaning and differed from other international representatives in Kabul. I heard in many informal discussions that stability must come before women's rights. We argued that you have to think strategically about what kind of society to develop, what kind of power structures to promote, and in this, gender perspectives are essential. (Mari Skåre).

Engaging strategically also – and critically – entails strategic positioning.

Strategic and dedicated efforts matter, and the level of the positions matters. My position as NATO Secretary General's Special Representative was created at a high-level. This assured access to high level representatives in the UN, in member and partner countries and vis-a-vis the military. Doors opened. I visited Kabul several times in my capacity as Special Representative and always met with strong and articulate representatives of civil society who presented their recommendations to NATO. But I also met with high-level officials in the government and representatives of the international community. The position conferred authority. As a Special Representative of the Secretary-General, I was the voice of the Secretary-General when I spoke on the subject of women in international peace and security – including women's rights. (Mari Skåre).

Doors that open are only the first step in a long process.

"You are trying to export the Western model," critics would say. But this is a false argument. It is not a question of export, but of contributing to structures that can take the case forward. For instance, the Afghan government is now reporting to the Human Rights Council in Geneva. Supporting its capacity development, we can help the government to meet the standards of international norms that it has itself endorsed. Then it becomes not a matter of our imposition, but of their responsibility. The improvements that we see in Afghanistan on women's rights and position in society are the result of the courageous and hard work of Afghan women and men. The international community can and should continue to support these forces that are critically important for the future of Afghanistan.

We also have to work on our own institutions. In NATO, that means supporting leadership structures that view gender equality as a priority. This has to be linked to professional competence in staffing, good planning, adequate resourcing and evaluations. There have to be mechanisms of reporting, of complaint and responses. All of this will work towards changes in the organization's institutional culture.

The bottom line? Gender perspectives are central to foreign policy, but are not adequately institutionalized in relation to other political tasks (Mari Skåre).

4 Conclusions

In November 2014, another Norwegian-supported school was opened in Faryab, and the Norwegian government put out a press release on the event with a photo of the opening ceremony.⁵⁸ In the foreground, sitting in a single row of chairs, are the important persons in the local power structure – the governor, other administration officials, the elders, religious leaders and aid officials. They are all men. Behind them is a sea of white and blue headscarves.



The photo captures (but the text does not say), what Norwegian aid officials and diplomats working in Afghanistan by this time fully realized. Promoting women's rights and equality in this environment meant working against a cultural orientation and an entrenched social and political power structure that privileged men. To some Norwegians, this simply made the task even more imperative, requiring concerted and long-term efforts that brokered no compromise with the basic principles of women's rights. Norway should indeed speak out even if others did not. But they were also sensitivity to methods, recognizing the need for tactical compromises along the way.

As to which way was most promising, opinions differed. Some warned that simply "preaching women's rights" would lead nowhere; the message had to be baked into projects that made a material difference in the lives of women. Others advocated empowerment strategies that would enable the women to organize and press for their rights through advocacy and political action.⁵⁹ Points raised by critics at home that aid programs for women, notably girls' schools, were instrumentalized for political purposes to camouflage a less popular military engagement, was not a concern. The

⁵⁸ https://www.regjeringen.no/nb/aktuelt/skole_afghanistan/id2341666/

⁵⁹ A report prepared for NORAD in 2014 developed a distinction among aid activities for women based on whether they were designed to transform gender roles ('transformative') or fitted into existing roles ('integrative'). Torunn Wimpelmann and Arne Strand, *Working with Gender in Rural Afghanistan: Experiences from Norwegian-funded NGO projects*. Bergen, CMI, 2014. <http://www.cmi.no/publications/file/5299-working-with-gender-in-rural-afghanistan.pdf>

important thing was that the schools were built and rights projects financed. “Something good can come out of something bad - *‘hell i uhell’*”, an official said.

The frustrations were legion. Empowerment strategies butted up against the rewards of dependence on foreign support. Working “within the bubble” – the small circle of educated women among Afghanistan’s urban elite who spoke English and to whom the foreigners could readily relate – had severe limitations, yet there were no ready alternatives. The negative effects of the security situation were felt in numerous ways. The solid consensus at home in support of women’s rights, while essential, also had the deadening effect of something that was taken for granted. In the day-to-day work of the embassy staff, women’s rights were mostly “low politics”. Some worried about the enormity of the task and its uncertain consequences. “Promoting women’s rights and equality was an almost ritual obligation, driven by political correctness, particularly at home, but there was little understanding of how we could do this in practice, and what the broader implications were”, one aid official mused.

Over time, there was also a noticeable change in underlying attitudes towards the grand social transformative project on which the international community embarked in the early 2000s, and within which women’s rights was an emblematic component. The change is well captured in the reflections of a Norwegian diplomat who served in Afghanistan two times after 2001. Around mid-decade, he was among a core of young, Western European diplomats and aid officials in Kabul who worked on the democratization and rights agenda. They were committed, idealistic and energetic. Some had considerable knowledge of Afghanistan, and a few had relevant language skills. “It was a time of great commitment and engagement. We worked around the clock. We had hopes for the future. We were idealistic and self-driven and wanted to make a difference. We also had full support from home,” the Norwegian diplomat later noted.

As he looks back a few years later, idealism has been tempered by pragmatism. “You become pragmatic. You ask yourself - what functions? What we did in Afghanistan was a drop in the ocean. We built a bubble in the cities, a bubble that resembled ourselves. This is a very conservative society. It cannot be changed from the outside. Change has to be brought by the Afghans. It is their responsibility. There are fewer idealists among us now. We are exhausted. I no longer believe we can build nations.”

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Photo: Merete Taksdal

Norway has a strong political commitment to promote the rights of women and their participation in public life through its development cooperation programs. A government White Paper on the subject in 2008 proclaimed that "Norway shall speak out where others prefer to be silent" – though without the question mark appearing in the title of this study. The added question mark conveys the complications typically arising when principles are translated into practice. In the case of Afghanistan – where Norwegian aid projects predate the much larger development cooperation program after 2001 – the complications were daunting.