



sures are not taken to address the underlying structural problem of exclusion, discrimination, corruption, poor governance, and armed violence.

Afghanization: post-2014 Strategies

A fundamental lesson that needs to be acknowledged and applied in the run-up to 2014 and beyond is the strategic importance of addressing the absence of justice and related human rights violations in Afghanistan. Persistent structural injustices, and the absence of judicial and political remedies, represent a threat to the fragile gains that have been achieved in recent times. Such profound problems will also likely thwart any future peace initiatives and will undermine the realization of overdue social justice objectives.

The long years of war and political turmoil in Afghanistan have added to the complexity of the problems that need to be addressed on an urgent basis to safeguard against the continued loss of life and to allow for dignified and safe living conditions. It may well be that the departure of NATO will open opportunities for peace-loving Afghans to bring armed conflict and structural violence to an end. It is of great significance that Afghans have an innate sense of justice and a strong sense of dignity and self-worth. When this is coupled with a rising tide of young people who aspire to a peaceful future and are assertive in challenging the harmful policies of the past, there are grounds for optimism. Afghanistan's human rights defenders led the challenge in 2010 to a blanket

amnesty law that effectively green-lighted impunity. Numerous civil society actors throughout the country are engaged in an uphill but impressive campaign to roll back deeply engrained discrimination that marginalizes women, girls and minority groups.

The majority of Afghans want a just peace and means of reconciliation that reflects what this implies, namely a process that is geared to ending armed violence, structural inequalities and the abuse of power. Building a state system that is inclusive and fair is critical to healing the wounds of a brutalized and fractured society. Building a political framework that is conducive to securing respect for human rights requires an acknowledgement that the absence of justice is a strategic issue that cannot be sidelined for the short-term expedient goals that have undermined a durable and democratic transition since 2001. Initiatives to bring about positive transformative change in Afghanistan will have greater possibility of success than before when a culture of impunity lacks the support of powerful external and internal actors. Afghanistan is facing troubled and uncertain times but meaningful support for the human rights aspirations of Afghans will greatly facilitate a transformation that is in the best interests of the Afghan people. In the same vein, continued support for abusive and predatory power structures will condemn the people of Afghanistan and its neighbours to continued violence, death and deprivation whatever the content of the changes that make the headlines next year.

Jamila Afghani

To Be a frontline Soldier

I do understand the journey I have started for social justice is a long way ahead, my success so far has depended on my people's and my colleagues' support. Throughout the journey I have learned that it's crucial to design projects based on the need of the community. The very first project we started was a library for women "Nazo Annah Library". My friends and I brought

the books we had together in a room where other women could benefit from them. But women were not coming to our library, only youths were coming in. Hence, I thought it's good to encourage the youths to pass our message to their families. Therefore, we had a policy if one male library member introduced five female members then there would be some presents, and we gave



them the presents at the monthly meetings in front of other library members. It was a good motivating method and we have now more than 2000 library members in three provinces and currently 70% of library members are female and 30% are male. I believe that Afghans understand the ways to solve their problems, they only need facilitation and support.

That is why I always say: "We (women activists) are frontline soldiers." When I started my work for education of women and children the very first objection I received was from a religious person of the community. It was beyond my understanding that an Imam well versed in Islam will create trouble for education. The very first verse of Holy Quran revealed to the Holy Prophet was about Reading, the importance of the PEN and how knowledge makes human beings different from other creatures). I invited the Imam in Ghazni province who was preaching against my work for a meeting, through the support of some of our friends. When he entered he was covering his face, ashamed of meeting a woman. During the discussion finally he was convinced that a woman having Islamic knowledge can work for others' education and the country's betterment. He started to support our work and through his speeches on Fridays we got large numbers of women – even those who opposed our work before started to send their children to our centre.

I attended the WISE conference in 2008 where I learned from a Filipino sister how they engaged Imams on women rights and Human Rights issues in the Philippines. I copied that idea by putting it in the framework of Afghanistan. With the Muslim Women's Shura Council (I am one of the board members) we developed a training manual about women's right from an Islamic perspective and trained 25 Imams from the most famous mosques of Kabul city. The Imams had the obligation to preach what they had learned in Friday Khutbas for people. I was not sure that the Imams would keep their promises, therefore, we trained 25 youths from Kabul University Dormitory as monitors to go and visit the mosques during Friday Khutbas. This innovative step made our project very much practical and successful as youths from 16

provinces utilised their Fridays in visiting the mosque and learned from the Imams about Human Rights and Women Rights on the one side and on the other side the Imams were conscious of their commitment and this conscious work had the desired results.

In one of the mosques when the Imam was talking about women's right, an old man was crying and after the Imam had finished the man touched the Imam's shoulder, crying out: "Why had he not said that before?" The man told that he done all the wrong things, he never allowed his daughters to go to school, and never allowed his daughter-in-law to visit a doctor and he never asked his daughter for her agreement to her marriage. Now having five sons and each son having daughters, the old man has become a women's rights' advocate urging his sons to allow the granddaughters education. This is the way I believe, though I am not God to change everything. But as a human being I may change a few persons' mentality in a positive direction and each one may help many others...Light a candle and many other candles will be lit.

When I look back how I was able to think of these methods to solve problems, I remember my childhood story when I was around 6 years old I loved to wear green bangles and it was my world of happiness. One day, myself and a cousin of mine arranged a party to marry our dolls. Mine was a female one "Parigak" (fairy) and she was married to my cousin's doll. After the happy end of the party I asked my cousin to give back my doll to me but she refused saying it was the custom that girls after marriage become the property of their in-laws. "You have no right any more to your doll!". I was crying in a corner and I broke my green bangles one after another in order to reduce my pain, but it was the very first lesson I learned: "It's unjust, it's unfair, it's not right and I will not accept these customs which make women slaves." I promised Parigak to regain her safely and I promised myself to help other women get rid of these unfair customs and I believe Islamic teachings are the only way to help us to restore our very basic human rights.

Jamila Afghani is not her real name. 'Afghani' is the name that this feisty woman chose for herself a decade ago when she got involved with social activism, deciding that she would only be identified as an Afghan

rather than be linked to any ethnic group or tribe. (Afghan surnames usually reflect the tribe and ethnicity of the person). At first, her father objected to her unilateral decision to drop her surname and later on her husband



made the same objection, but Jamila stuck to her decision and is now well known by her acquired name.

It is a tenacity that she has needed. Born with a polio-induced disability, Jamila was made aware of her handicap at an early age when family members openly speculated whether anyone would marry her. "I decided then that I would never be a burden and would look after my own needs." But what took her from self-sufficiency to helping others was a tragic occurrence in one of the refugee camps of Peshawar, a city where she and her family had fled to escape the escalating violence of Afghanistan. "In a single day 36 women died of heat and hunger in the Shamshato refugee camp. In a single day I together with some friends collected clothes and food for 1000 families. That is when we realised that we have the energy, we have the power to change things."

There was no looking back after that and Jamila set out to address what she felt to be most pressing need for the women in the refugee camps "The reason for the deaths was the backwardness, the lack of education, the inability to understand good and bad and make the right decisions."

Though Jamila and her group were doing a creditable social service, the work was not easy as not everyone saw it that way. Each of the refugee camps in the area was under the control of one or the other of resistance leaders, most of whom were conservative. "They hated all things brought in by the Soviets into Afghanistan, so they were opposed to education for women. Besides, they feared that women could be easily corrupted and trapped in the hands of foreigners."

To overcome the resistance Jamila began with the least controversial aspect - Quranic education. "This gave us an entry point and from that we expanded to health education and then actual literacy classes." She continued this approach after her return to Afghanistan through NECDO (Noor Educational and Capacity Development Organisation), a non-profit organisation whose goal is "to seek Allah's pleasure by supporting our people through the light of education (formal and informal) & community mobilization for a just society based on gender equality." To achieve this NECDO works through religious leaders, training clerics in aspects of Islam and Islamic tenets with a special emphasis on women's rights and human rights. This enables them to tap into a wide and valuable network. Community life in Afghanistan centres around the mosques and even

in urban areas, weekly Friday prayers are an important event during which the preachers deliver discourses on social issues. "Imams play a very important role in our community. We choose carefully and pick those who have some influence with others". People tend to accept what their religious leaders say, whereas projects that promote women's rights and human rights may often be seen as being 'foreign' and therefore objectionable. "150 imams are being trained in 7 provinces and they have formed an Imam volunteer network. We hope the message will spread from one to the other "like one candle lighting another." Jamila feels the strengthened knowledge of Islam will also help counter the resurgent influence of the Taliban, whose intolerant brand of Islam is viewed by most Afghans as being alien to Afghan culture. Despite the attempts to be balanced and sensitive in her approach Jamila has many critics. Conservative elements feel she is violating religious tenets and some of the strongest opposition has come from within her immediate community and family."

The criticism is due to a lack of awareness about Islam, she says. "They are not religious but conservative". Though many conservative practices in Afghanistan arise out of custom and have no religious roots, they have been attributed to Islam by community and religious leaders, thus giving them a false religious sanctity. Often activists like Jamila have a hard time convincing people of the difference between the two.

Jamila's way has been to argue for her right to educate women within the framework of Islam. This in turn has often been criticised by civil society leaders who feel she is too religious in her outlook. "Sometimes I feel very lonely. The conservative elements say: 'Jamila is introducing a new Islam' and civil society says I am very Islamist."

But some of the greatest rewards have come from the change in those who criticised her. "One of the women in my family who used to turn her face away has now enrolled her daughter in one of my educational classes. She recently told me: 'Jamila, I wish all my sons were daughters because I see how much my daughter is benefiting from your class.' No mean achievement for Jamila in a country where sons are prized high above daughters. In: Ten Stories - Ten Years DEZA in Afghanistan, 2013.