Expert Round Table
Gender Equality in Afghan-German Development Cooperation
BMZ | Berlin | 11 March 2014
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Summary of the Expert Round Table

After some initial improvement, the situation of women and girls across large areas of Afghanistan has deteriorated again. Everyday life for many Afghan women is shaped by political, economic and family-related discrimination and violence, even though Article 22 of the Afghan constitution explicitly acknowledges gender equality. This is why Germany’s Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) attaches such importance to promoting the interests of women and girls in Afghanistan. The expert roundtable invited Afghan government and non-government actors who are highly committed to this cause to share their perspective and discuss the latest developments with their German counterparts, with a view to spearheading future activities in this field.

In her opening speech, Dr. Uta Böllhoff, Director General at the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), declared that the expert roundtable should be an open space to brainstorm and discuss ways of promoting women’s rights, talk about lessons learnt and to outline conclusions for the conference “Reliable Partnership in Times of Change – New Country Strategy for Afghanistan 2014–2017”, taking place on 12–13 March 2014. She highlighted achievements, especially in the realms of education, health and economy but also referred to challenges such as the lack of economic opportunities or the increasing violence against women, which largely remains unpunished. She emphasized: “Women’s right are not a nice-to-have, but core”.

As Dr. Böllhoff explained, the aim of development cooperation should be to prevent a rollback by identifying effective ways of promoting gender equality despite religious and cultural differences and maintaining the dialogue with like-minded as well as non-like-minded actors.

The opening remarks were followed by a keynote speech about the challenges ahead by Dr. Sima Samar, Chairperson of the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission. She described the huge change that Afghanistan has undergone in comparison to former times, with reference to constitutional gender equality, the ratification of the CEDAW or the presidential decree for the EVAW. However, these changes were mostly restricted to urban areas. Dr. Samar also explained that 2014 would be a year of transition for Afghanistan with the withdrawal of the international forces and the takeover of the Afghan National Security Forces, the presidential election and the reduction of development cooperation that might have a deteriorating impact on Afghans, especially women and girls. She named the lack of education for women, prevailing violence against women, poor health care, difficult economic opportunities and public participation as the main challenges in promoting women’s rights in Afghanistan. Yet, “women’s public participation is better than at any time in Afghan history”, Dr. Samar declared. Her concluding recommendations were to

- focus on accountability and anti-corruption,
- further women’s empowerment and education,
- raise awareness for women’s issues,
- address human rights violations and war crimes and
- engage in long-term reconciliation.
The following panel discussed the promotion of women’s affairs in Afghanistan from the perspective of the state, civil society and the international community. The aim of the session was to establish the status quo of promoting gender equality in Afghanistan and to discuss past achievements, the current situation and prospects for the future. Many observers are concerned that the current situation reflects the beginning of a roll back of the progress that had been made in the past decade. The panellists for this discussion were Pamela F. Husain, Deputy Country Representative for UN Women in Afghanistan, Nargis Nehan, Executive Director, Equality for Peace and Democracy, and H. E. Shafiq Ahmad Qarizada, Deputy Minister of Finance.

- The panelists agreed that the support of the international community is still crucial to success, especially when it comes to civil society efforts. However, donor efforts should be more coordinated and accountability between the Afghan government and the international community increased.

- At the same time, the international community should adjust to Afghan needs to prevent gender issues from being discredited as part of a Western agenda. Afghan ownership is required.

- Men and youth need to be included in discussions on gender issues to change their set of values in a context-sensitive way. Religious leaders and institutions could also play an important role in the political process and the promotion of gender equality.

- Violence against women is a symptom rather than a cause. Thus, focus needs to be paid to root causes, such as poverty, that result in violence against women and perpetuate social inequities.

“Gender is not a project, it’s a process, a change in thinking.”, Pamela F. Husain

The second panel discussed the promotion of gender equality in the daily practice of development cooperation. After the first session summarised the overall situation of women in Afghanistan and the efforts of state and non-state actors to promote gender equality, this session focused on success stories and lessons learnt from the perspective of governmental and non-governmental development agencies. The discussion centred on practical experiences, strategies and approaches employed within German-Afghan development cooperation and also reflected on cultural perspectives of the international and Afghan actors. The panellists for this discussion were Katharina Hild and Razia Fazl, Gender Experts of Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH, Suzana Lipovac, Founder and Chief Executive Officer of the NGO Kinderberg e.V. and Abdul Wahed Zia Moballegh, Senior Advocacy and Research Officer of Open Society Afghanistan.

- The speakers highlighted the importance of creating awareness for violence against women, for example through the EVAW campaigns. Involving the government and religious leaders in such campaigns is a key to success.

- Violence against women is a crime. Discrimination against women cannot be justified on religious grounds. Culture and tradition must not be mixed up with religion.
Gender mainstreaming is only possible with Afghan partners; Germany can only support gender-sensitive development but cannot create it. Development cooperation should avoid creating parallel structures and needs to adapt to the Afghan context.

Male stakeholders need to be included in the process. Mullahs can be catalysts of change but at the same time part of the problem as they have their own interests. A grassroots approach that induces change on the ground is thus preferable. In general, the change of minds and paradigms has to affect different levels of policy making in Afghanistan.

Progress, also in terms of the security situation, is mostly limited to cities, thus there is a need to reach out to districts.

“If we stop now, we will lose not only the achievements of the last ten years. We will lose much more than that!” Suzana Lipovac commented on the commitment of the donor community after the end of the ISAF mission.

In the afternoon, the experts split into two parallel working groups. The aim of these sessions was for parallel working groups to come up with specific proposals on how development cooperation could better support the empowerment of girls and women in Afghanistan. Working group 1 focused on the promotion of gender equality in the context of rule of law, political participation and public administration. Governance is a key sector when it comes to strengthening the equal rights and participation of men and women from a structural perspective. The constitutional rights and the stated aims of the Afghan government regarding gender equality in the ANDS lay the foundation for promoting equal participation for women in all areas of Afghan society. The panelists discussed achievements and setbacks with regard to the contribution of women in the public sector and related professional fields. The lead discussants of the working group were Dr. Babak Khalatbari, Desk Officer at the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, Humaira Ameer Rasuli, Executive Director of Medica Afghanistan and Zulfia Zalmi, Vice President of the Afghanistan Independent Bar Association.

- The international community needs to speak with one voice. The conditionalisation of aid can be an effective tool to influence the Afghan government.
- False “cultural awareness” by the international community can torpedo women’s rights when supposedly “traditional values” are respected. However, gender policies need an Afghan face.
- Women quotas and “equal pay for equal work” policies were suggested.
- Investing in education is an effective means of achieving gender equality.
- UN Resolution 1325 (2000) needs to be taken seriously for Afghanistan.

The second working group looked at the promotion of gender equality by focusing on sustainable development and employment promotion. The latest figures indicate that women and girls account for only 20% of the total number of gainfully employed individuals in Afghanistan. However, compared to the situation 10 years ago, this is already a big step forward. Traditional gender roles primarily limit women to a reclusive life in the private sphere. In rural areas in particular, the economic role of women is limited by the desire to control interaction between female members of the family and non-family
members. The urban centres of Afghanistan seem to offer a somewhat more progressive environment for the economic activities of women outside the home. An evaluation of the figures published in the most recent National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (2011/12) indicates that the number of women on the labour market has dropped in recent years. It can be assumed that the reduction in international development commitment will exacerbate the situation on the labour market and that this will hit women disproportionately hard because they have so few alternatives. In this discussion, the panellists discussed these positive and challenging trends, and also showed what business women can achieve.

The lead discussants of the working group were Sahar Ada, Head of the Gender Unit at Afghan Chamber of Commerce and Industries, Torge Mattheisens and Anosha Wahidi, Desk Officers at the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ).

• Similar to the other working group, they agreed that the promotion of gender equality should have an Afghan face. The international community needs to accept Afghan leadership on gender issues to avoid giving efforts a counterproductive Western label. Because of the challenging environment, realistic management of expectations from donors is important.
• Projects should be integrated and not isolated. Due to the diverse situations in different areas of the country, solutions must be adapted to the local context.
• Men with social, political or religious influence should be mobilized as advocates for and messengers of women's rights.

In her concluding observations after the working groups, Dr. Uta Bölhoff summed up some of the key messages of the expert roundtable:

• Gender is not a project, it’s a process,
• Poverty is the root cause of gender inequality,
• Men (especially Mullahs) can serve as catalysts to raise awareness,
• Conditionalizing support (e.g. through quotas) is important.

The round table was followed by a side programme during the next day. Representatives of the Afghan delegation took part in meetings with the German Women’s Security Council as well as with members of the German Parliament’s Committee on Economic Cooperation and Development (AWZ).

The main messages of the expert roundtable were also presented during the opening day of the main conference “Reliable Partnership in Times of Change – New Country Strategy for Afghanistan” by Nargis Nehan who served as representative of the Afghan expert delegation.

Nargis Nehan gave the following recommendations for development cooperation with a view to gender equality:

• Discriminations have been quite systematic against women in Afghanistan and we need to come up with system approaches to respond to systematic discriminations.
• Achieving gender equality is a process not project which requires long term approach and patience.
• The National Priority Programs (NPPs) have to be not only gender sensitive but should also be gender friendly.

• The Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework (TMAF) has only two indicators for elimination of violence against women which portrays Afghan women as victims only. We need to revise the TMAF and have more indicators for empowering and promoting women as leaders and agents of change as well.

• The National Budget should be gender responsive and Ministry of Finance should evaluate budget performance of line ministries with a gender lens.

• We need to get more women into all branches of government so that we can design and implement women empowerment programs in some sectors ourselves, having executive power rather than advocating men to implement them.

• We need to train and enable women and encourage them to get into male dominated sectors such as communication, security and finance.

• We need to build capacity of male policy makers on gender equality subjects by having them participate in gender mainstreaming dialogues as panel members.

• We need to identify and promote female role models in each sector to encourage not only women but also families and communities’s support for women’s civic participation and leadership.

• We need to provide an enabling environment for women working in different sectors such as basic facilities, training men how to work with women and ensure elimination of any type of discriminations and harassments against women.

• The Afghan government executive branch should refrain from approval of any law or policy draft and its submission to parliament which violates women’s rights.

• International community’s support to Afghan government should be conditional to women participation in all three branches of government as well as development and implementation of women empowerment policies and strategies for different sectors.
After some initial success, the situation of women and girls across large areas of Afghanistan has deteriorated again. Everyday life for many Afghan women is shaped by political, economic and family-related discrimination and violence, even though Article 22 of the Afghan constitution explicitly acknowledges gender equality. This is why Germany’s Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) attaches such importance to promoting the interests of women and girls in Afghanistan. This event offers a chance to discuss the latest developments, with a view to spearheading future activities in this field.

The conference language is English.

As of 8.30 am Registration and welcome coffee

9 am
Opening and round of introduction, Facilitator Dr Frank Capellan, Deutschlandfunk

9.45 am
Introduction
Dr Uta Böllhoff, Director General, German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)

10.10 am
Challenges Ahead – Keynote speech
Dr Sima Samar, Chairperson, Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC)

10.30 am
PANEL DISCUSSION
Promotion of women’s affairs in Afghanistan from the perspective of the state, civil society and international community
• Pamela Husain, Deputy Country Representative for UN Women in Afghanistan
• H.E. Shafiq Ahmad Qarizada, Deputy Minister of Finance, Afghanistan
• Nargis Nehan, Executive Director, Equality for Peace and Democracy, Afghanistan

11.30 am Coffee break
12 pm  PANEL DISCUSSION

*Gender equality in the daily practice of development cooperation*

- Razia Fazl and Katharina Hild, Gender Experts, Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH
- Suzana Lipovac, Founder and Managing Director, KinderBerg e.V., Germany
- Abdul Wahed Zia Moballegh, Senior Country Director and Senior Programme Officer, Open Society Afghanistan

1 pm  Joint Lunch

2 pm  PARALLEL WORKING GROUPS

**WORKING GROUP 1**

*Promoting gender equality: Focus on rule of law, political participation and public administration*

- Dr Babak Khalatbari, Desk Officer, German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)
- Humaira Ameer Rasuli, Executive Director, Medica Afghanistan
- Zulfia Zalmi, Vice President, Afghanistan Independent Bar Association (AIBA)

**WORKING GROUP 2**

*Promoting gender equality: Focus on sustainable economic development and employment promotion*

- Sahar Ada, Head of the Gender Unit, Afghan Chamber of Commerce and Industries (ACCI)
- Torge Matthiesen, Desk Officer, German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)
- Anosha Wahidi, Deputy Head of Division, German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)

4 pm  Presentation of working group results

4.30 pm  Concluding observations

Dr Uta Böllhoff, Director General, German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)

4.45 pm  End of programme

6 pm  Joint dinner
**List of Participants, 11 March 2014**

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