



Feminist Research

Homepage: www.gathacognition.com/journal/gcj2

<http://dx.doi.org/10.21523/gcj2>



Review Article

Gender in Afghanistan's Wheat and Agricultural Literature - How to Get to Empowerment?



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Abstract

This review of 45 documents demonstrates the massive evidence gap in gender relations in Afghanistan agriculture. Women face greater constraints than men in generating an income from agriculture, especially if single, but how this has changed over time and many other assumptions require empirical study. Furthermore, how to empower women economically in a patriarchal society is unclear, but the literature suggests that masculinity studies may present some answers. The review highlights the methodological challenges associated with conducting gender sensitive research in Afghanistan and the way misunderstood gender relations create further development challenges. Many questions remain about the role of agriculture in Afghanistan livelihoods and how this shapes, and is shaped by, gender relationships. Moreover, what an agenda for women's empowerment should look like in Afghanistan's rural farming communities remains unclear from the review. Empowering women in Afghan's agriculture sector requires considerable experimentation, more data and contextually relevant, carefully designed programs. The review is relevant to development practitioners, researchers and agricultural scientists working in Afghanistan.

Article history

Received: 18 April 2019

Accepted: 06 May 2019

Key words

Afghanistan;
Agriculture;
Development;
Feminist;
Gender;
Livelihoods;
Wheat.

Processing Editor(s)

Fatima Sadiqi
Souad Slaoui

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1 INTRODUCTION

In 2015 Afghan President Ashraf Ghani announced that, 'women's rights are a top priority.'¹ The Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework (ANPDF) (2017-2021) sets standards for inclusion and gender equity. The Afghan Constitution (2004) declares women and men to have equal rights and privileges and the government of Afghanistan signed the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which aim to "leave no one behind" and achieve gender equality. However, many other authors prior to 2015 explain a very different reality. The United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Gender Inequality Index ranked Afghanistan 153 out of 160 countries in 2017, highlighting the dire need to consider women and gender relations.

This review provides a synthesis of the literature on the links between gender and social relationships, livelihood choices, and wheat-based systems in Afghanistan and demonstrates a massive evidence gap in the literature on gender in agriculture development.

This review privileges the views of Afghanistan women and men (where possible) through the presentation of anthropological evidence and by situating 'knowledge' within its historical context.

Given there is not much wheat related literature that can be considered gender-aware, it was necessary for the review to expand to literature that covered agriculture in general and rural livelihoods in particular. On the one side, wheat is not a crop suitable for the agro-ecological conditions of the whole country. On the other side, gender roles and relations are highly diverse according to ethnic groups, rural/urban communities and position of the household within the community. The great diversity of wheat agriculture and gender arrangements has rendered any attempt to contextualize geographically the topics under review difficult. Uncertainty remains concerning which specific localities in Afghanistan the literature covers as many anthropological studies use pseudonyms instead of actual village names.

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.21523/gcj2.18020202>

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From the literature it is clear that ‘gender’ deserves more extensive discussion. This review shows that not enough is known about which palette of opportunities are available to different categories of men and women and how this affects their livelihood. Many of the reviewed references discuss the diversity of livelihood strategies and how a greater exploration and development of these livelihoods could help the processes of reconstruction, change, and resilience (Gilmour, 2007; Grace and Pain, 2004; Kantor and Pain, 2011; Lautze *et al.*, 2002; Mihran, 2011; Pain and Lautze, 2002). This review presents the different framings of Afghan gender roles and compares them to highlight the complexities and negotiations that encompass gender relations.

The paper’s structure is as follows: the theoretical framing of women’s empowerment; a brief explanation of the review process; introduction to Afghanistan; wheat; women’s role in agriculture; empowering or subordinating women; masculinity as the subject of a missing conversation, followed by the conclusion that the bulk of development work is based upon assumptions that may do more harm than good.

2 WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT THEORETICAL FRAMING

Empowerment is essential to women’s emancipation. When the personal, interpersonal and political power of oppressed and marginalized people is increased, they can act together to improve their situations (Freire, 1973; Gutierrez, 1990). Empowerment seeks to increase the personal, interpersonal and political power of oppressed and marginalized populations for individual and collective transformation (Lee, 2001). Empowerment helps women to understand how they are oppressed and dominated and how they can change their situation. Because empowerment relates to women’s own experiences, women’s views should necessarily be given priority (Carr, 2003; Grosz, 2010). The primary assumption of the empowerment approach is that women know what the problem or issue is and women have the ability to solve their problems.

As Kandiyoti (2007) elaborates, “in a context where the majority of women are unable to read or write, risk their lives in childbirth, have no access to roads, safe water supplies, schools or medical facilities, capabilities and rights are severely restricted”. In such a context asking women how they would like to be empowered is unlikely to lead to strategic changes. Women, in line with their feminine identity, are likely to request modest changes. Women cannot be separated from their environment - historical, social and political forces combine with economic and religious forces to shape women’s status. How then should Afghan women become ‘empowered’?

An additional aspect of empowerment concerns its individual aspects. Molyneux (2008) argues that the popular adoption of ‘empowerment’ as a development topic is because it suits market capitalism and the ideal

neo-liberal individual. The dominant development narrative of empowering women so they ‘lift’ their communities out of poverty ignores the structural barriers to women’s individual self-actualization and the value in collective mobilization (Cornwall and Rivas, 2015). Similarly, Chakravarti (2008) argues that dominant empowerment discourses ignore the relationships between and among men and women and tends to reproduce existing inequalities. To avoid excessive individualism, Izugbara (2004) argues that a more comprehensive definition of women’s empowerment is needed; one not limited to increased incomes or related to financial advances. To be empowered requires an exploration of the links between the personal and the political (Ahikire, 2008).

Consequently, empowerment is a theory, a process and a framework (Carr, 2003; Carroll, 1994). As a theoretical framework, empowerment helps people take more control over their lives (AlMaseb and Julia, 2007). As a process, empowerment begins by recognizing the nature of the oppression followed by an increase in awareness and consciousness and later transformation (Gutierrez, 1990; Gutierrez and Lewis, 1999). As Kabeer (1994) explains, ‘empowerment from within’ requires reflection, analysis and assessment of what has been taken for granted so that the socially constructed and socially shared basis of apparently individual problems can be revealed for this will create solidarity and help build movements for change. For Lee (2001), empowerment consists of a variety of ‘approaches and frameworks for practice’.

Empowering women in Afghanistan involves understanding their relationships with men. Attempts by the elite or foreigners to improve the rights and status of women have been consistently resisted by Afghan men (Hirschkind and Mahmood, 2002). Zulfacar (2006) writes about the “pendulum of gender politics in Afghanistan”: women gain rights through policy reforms and then loose them through violent backlash. The ‘traditional’ Afghan household “does not carry with it the notion of the pursuit of individual advantage” (Pain 2010). Does this mean that empowerment of women has no place in Afghanistan society or, more specifically, that the way it has been approached and studied is inappropriate?

3 RESEARCH BACKGROUND

In order to take stock of the current situation with regards to integration of gender and social equity in wheat research for development, and to conceptualize opportunities for strengthening this connection, a critical appraisal of peer-reviewed and grey literature using a gender lens was commissioned. Due to a dearth of wheat literature, the review explores broader agricultural and anthropological literature to answer the research questions:

- How does the world look, and work, for men and women in wheat growing households?

Table 1. Inclusion and exclusion review criteria

Selection criteria	Exclusion criteria	Wild card
Wheat growing regions	Non-wheat growing regions	Gender relations in non-wheat growing regions
‘Afghanistan’/‘gender’/‘wheat’ plus see below for additional search terms	No reference to social equity or gender roles	
Anthropological		

- What do we know about social relationships and mediating processes² that exist in the prime wheat growing regions in Afghanistan?
- How do gender relations shape livelihood choices - including nutrition, food security and agriculture?

Forty-five peer-reviewed and secondary/unpublished sources were reviewed using the following databases: Taylor and Francis Online Journals, ProQuest, JSTOR, SAGE Journals Online, Google Scholar, and Wiley Online Library. Table 1 outlines the criteria for inclusion and exclusion of documents into the review.

The search terms used in combination with ‘Afghanistan’, ‘gender’ and ‘wheat’ were: adaptive capacity, agency, agriculture, aid, body politics, climate change, colonialism, community, conflict, cropping, cultural norms, customary organizations, decision-making, development, displacement, division of labor, divorce, drought, employment, empowerment, family, farm labor, female participation, feminist geopolitics, food and foodways, food security, freedom, fundamentalism, gender justice, gender politics, gender roles, gender stratification, gendered knowledge, generation, governance, health, honor, household economy, household livelihoods, identity, indigenous knowledge, integrity, intra-household bargaining, Islam, kinship, life histories, livelihood diversity, livestock, local governance, local livelihoods, local politics, marriage, masculinity, memory, Muslim women, off-farm labor, patriarchy, personhood, policymaking, politics of gender, power, public goods, public space, reconstruction, resilience, risk, rural development, rural livelihoods, sexuality, social capital, social justice, social order, social protection, social status, state-building, suffering, tradition, veil, village, violence, vulnerability, war, women’s rights, women’s status.

4 INTRODUCTION TO AFGHANISTAN

The key challenges faced by the vast majority of Afghan farmers are shrinking land plots, poor irrigation and lack of rainwater, insufficient access to credit, market access, minimal mechanization, and a lack of agricultural and veterinary extension services. These challenges are

exacerbated by ongoing and persistent conflict in many areas of the country (Mihran, 2011). Approximately 19 million people live under the national poverty line, and rural poverty is increasing. Per capita GDP growth was 10.9 percent in 2012 and dropped to -1.7 percent in 2014, showing the negative economic effects of ongoing conflict (World Bank, 2014).

Agriculture is the greatest driver of the national economy, providing 58 percent of Afghanistan’s GDP (Kawasaki *et al.*, 2012). Eighty percent of Afghanistan’s 35 million people live in rural areas (World Bank, 2018), and agriculture is the main source of income for more than half of the rural population (Kawasaki *et al.*, 2012). Most rural households are grain deficient and depend on market access for food security. Many such households are landless, and income increasingly comes from off-farm sources (Pain and Shah, 2009). Nearly 45 percent of the population is food insecure (CSO, 2018).

Afghanistan’s population growth rate was around 3 percent from 2010-2015, with high levels of fertility (average of 5 children per woman) (CSO, 2018). Feeding Afghanistan’s growing population is a key challenge. The country relies heavily on food imports, which doubled between 2008 and 2011 (Del Castillo, 2014). Some authors argue that weak agricultural policies and poor governance have contributed to this situation (Del Castillo, 2014).

The economy used for relying on subsistence agriculture and pastoralism but now has been mainly diverted to fund local warlords through arms dealing, smuggling and opium sales (Kandiyoti, 2007). Under-investment in the agriculture sector by the government, climate variability and consistent crises, along with more lucrative opportunities from migration and gun trading challenge the widespread assumption that 85 percent of the population is dependent on agriculture (Mihran, 2011; Kantor and Pain, 2011). Accumulation is generally the strategy for wealthier families, while poor households utilize diverse livelihood options (Grace and Pain, 2004). The average household is having between three and six sources, including mobility (Gilmour, 2007). Many off-farm livelihoods and livelihood

combinations, which are typically needed for survival, remain under-researched.

Given the extent of landlessness in rural Afghanistan, which is well documented, class analysis based on land ownership structures and patterns of sharecropping are fundamental to understanding rural social relations (Scalise, 2009). Land ownership patterns underpin power relations both within the village and externally (Pain, 2016) and determine whether such relations are reciprocal or hierarchical, resulting in varying levels of exploitation and obligation. For example, wages are often paid in kind rather than cash, and remuneration can be determined by custom, gender, locality and age (Pain et al., 2016). Sharecroppers, who rent land to grow food, confront unequal patron-client relations and are not as productive as landowners. Insecure land tenure and land ownership controlled by an elite minority contribute to lower agriculture production rates (Pain et al., 2016).

Agriculture policies are considered by provincial stakeholders to be donor-driven, ill-designed and the product of top-down processes (Poole et al., 2017). They are designed with little consultation, insufficient knowledge and a lack of awareness of Afghanistan's heterogeneity and local realities (ODI, 2017). Afghanistan has more than 40 ethnic groups and a diverse terrain. Many households are not autonomous but rather embedded in hierarchical relationships (Pain et al., 2016). They create a barrier for some citizens and a ladder out of poverty for others (ODI, 2017). More evidence around these intersectional drivers of marginalization will lead to more effective and inclusive agricultural interventions.

In terms of (legal) livelihood opportunities wheat is the major staple crop, and other popular grains include barley, maize, rice and pulses. Farmers also grow several types of summer and winter vegetables and fruits such as potatoes, onions, tomatoes, okra, cauliflower, melons, watermelons, apricots, almonds, pomegranates, apples and grapes. Wheat comprises 77% of the total crops produced on irrigated land and 94% of the total crops produced on rain-fed land (Mihran, 2011). Afghanistan is one of the world's highest per-capita wheat consumers (World Bank, 2014). Wheat supplies about 60 percent of an average Afghan's caloric intake (Persaud, 2012). Wheat is therefore important to the nation's food security and nutrition. Despite this, only one study exists specifically devoted to wheat and its potential to impact on livelihoods (Coke, 2004); a gap that highlights the need for this review.

5 RESEARCHING WOMEN'S ROLE IN AGRICULTURE

The central social unit in Afghanistan that enables survival is the patriarchal extended family. In a context of inequitable state policies, poverty and widening inequality people lose hope and the household and the village becomes the main source of safety and economic

security (Brick, 2008). In Afghanistan, the eldest man has authority over everyone in the family. Strict gender segregation and restrictive codes of behavior govern women's lives because female virtue is associated with family honor (Moghadam, 2002).

Agriculture employs a large number of women (CSO, 2018) and women are involved in wheat production, but their tasks are often less visible than men's. Women are responsible for feeding the family and managing the household's nutrition. clean and prepare the seed, separate wheat and chaff, store the harvest and process and grind wheat inside the household (Gilmour, 2007). In times of food shortage, they mix the wheat flour with barley flour and legume flour (Lautze et al., 2002). Additionally, in poor households, women work on wheat fields during harvest time, but frequently alongside their husbands due to security concerns. Given that most agriculture extension workers are men, they are unable to reach women due to gender norms relating to sex segregation.

Women also perform the largest portion of unpaid domestic work (GoIRA, 2017). The literature review shows how little research has been conducted on the roles and responsibilities of different men and women and how this affects their livelihood opportunities and how it should affect development programming. In terms of agriculture, women farm small plots of land and rear livestock (Beath et al., 2013), however they are widely portrayed as mainly responsible for the household (unpaid care, housework and fulfilling family obligations). Data around women's role in agriculture remains somewhat contradictory.

Official statistics are likely to under-report women's involvement in farming. Socio-cultural norms mean public comments are often about what women 'should' do and not necessarily what they 'are' doing. Such norms of behavior are affected by wealth: richer households prevent women working on land due to the stigma attached to women working outdoors and because they can afford to hire labor (Maletta, 2008). This stigma can distort research and development programs if it is not taken into consideration at the design phase. While Afghan custom (about family honor) would keep most women inside the home this is impossible for an impoverished rural household. The household division of labor and the role that women play in agricultural activity in Afghanistan is not well understood.

Gilmore (2007) noted that female labor is under reported due to the research methods and enumerators used and an over-reliance on male household heads as respondents. Women play a greater role in family and community than is often portrayed in the agriculture literature because it remains hidden from external men (Khan, 2016). Grace (2004) found that women discount small vegetable plots grown within the house compound as agriculture because it is for subsistence. The most comprehensive study on gender roles in agriculture

(Grace, 2004), to which the literature keeps referring in varying degrees, shows that women tend to animals and make dairy products. And some women even have experience working in more profitable agricultural endeavors such as melons, orchards and vineyards. However, the author acknowledges that the limited time spent in each village (two days per village and two-and-a-half-weeks in total) prevented a deeper understanding of gender roles and relations.

This demonstrates the need for research methods that allow for observation as well as asking deep probing questions about all possible types of agricultural activities. This body of literature calls into questions the accuracy of figures on women's role in agriculture and on the importance of agriculture to local people's livelihood. Unfortunately, security issues and infrastructure deficiencies limit gender focused in-depth qualitative research. How can an understanding of women's empowerment be developed in a country with patchy and male biased data?

6 EMPOWERING OR SUBORDINATING WOMEN?

The previous section argued that women's role in agriculture is under-researched and this inhibits empowerment solutions. This section reveals that the status of women in Afghanistan is contested in the literature and thus the role women play in agriculture is hard to discern.

Like with women's labor, expressions of female power occur in the private domain of family (Kabeer and Khan, 2014). Being a wife and mother are central to a female's identity and thus prioritized. These roles are important to the politics of alliances, which are often done in private but then become central to tribal and village life (Khan, 2016). Consequently, a woman's absence from the public domain is not the same as subservience (Kabeer and Khan, 2014). Women's development projects receive a lot of attention in the literature, more due to their failure than success.

Traditional household dynamics makes defining an Afghanistan agenda for women's empowerment difficult. Gender relations are unlikely to fit neatly into survey questions that require closed responses, or development program frameworks that tend to seek out averages. Nevertheless, Afghan women do not appear united and empowered in the literature. Afghan women are foremost loyal to family or ethnic group and national agendas come second or third (whether related to gender, empowerment or other topics) (Zulfacar, 2011).

Debates about how to empower and develop women plague the literature. Rostami Povey (2004) advocates that development projects should focus on sectors in which women have traditionally been involved. Meanwhile, Grace and Pain (2004) argue that poultry, farming, and embroidery are traditional women's activities and focusing on these will only reproduce gender inequality. Beath *et al.*, (2013)

question the idea that increased female participation in male domains results in positive economic and social outcomes. Others (Wilcox *et al.*, 2014; Bahri, 2014; Tavva *et al.*, 2013; Eggerman and Panter-Brick, 2010) argue that expanding the role for women may be successfully achieved by focusing on the benefits to the family, rather than focusing on individual economic benefits or rights-based arguments.

Kabeer and Khan (2014) explain how viewing Afghanistan through a Western lens overlooks women's power. Kandiyoti (2017) uses the term 'patriarchal bargain' to describe how women exercise power within restrictive situations. Women pursue contextually significant strategies that may not look like empowerment to Western feminists but are clever negotiations resulting in more favorable outcomes, without backlash. These negotiations occur within the confines of women's gendered subjectivity and life options:

The women in our study did not experience 'Afghan culture' as a static and internally coherent system that lay outside the realm of contestation, but as the lived relationships of everyday life that had to be negotiated on a daily basis from highly unequal positions (Kabeer and Khan, 2014).

Jijelava and Vanclay (2014) argue that gender should be treated as a social relationship, in order to illuminate the patriarchal bargains that contribute to changes. Familial importance and co-dependency is frequently ignored by development programs that set out to 'save' women.

Yet, others question the adoption of a culturally relevant view, for culture suppresses women and aiming for complementarity of gender roles will result in slow development. Moghadam (2002) explains that women are only honored as mothers when they bear sons. According to Dupree (2004), "many Afghan folktales celebrate strong women as long as they keep their chastity." Women are extremely dependent on men and rely on them for financial support (Ahmed-Ghosh, 2003) and decision making. Dupree (2004) recounts how traditionally, and in Islam, the wife's right to care and security comes from submission to her husband's authority, and this may not necessarily be a good thing as not all households have a benevolent patriarch (Wu, 2012). When she becomes economically self-sufficient, this premise is challenged along with male expectations of obedience.

Domestic spaces and family life provide several challenges for women along with opportunities. A woman's position depends upon her *namus* (face/honor) (Fluri, 2011). Older women gain authority and influence based upon hierarchy and kinship networks (Fluri, 2011). Women's identity and position within a family and community can vary by educational attainment, age, family status, ethnicity and other networks. When discussing 'family' in Afghanistan, polygamous families in diverse ethnic groups require mentioning. In such

households, diverse age segments of household member matters to one's status, along with first and second wife status. Not all women within a polygamous marriage have the same rights, responsibilities and privileges. Hence, different kinds of women require different types of empowerment. Nevertheless, [Blumberg \(2015\)](#) and [Maletta \(2008\)](#) would prefer to see interventions take the family and kinship relationships as primary and try to increase women's well-being and security within these structures while acknowledging they are a primary source of women's oppression.

Empowering women across multiple domains is possible but will take different initiatives. [Pain \(2010\)](#) recounts how gender literature focuses on Afghan women as economic agents, including women's participation in the labor market; their agricultural roles (greater than many statistics represent); ownership of assets; inheritance and the disjuncture between what Sharia law says and what customary practices permit. A randomized field experiment across 500 villages found that a community project that mandated female participation increased mobility and income generation for women but did not increase their household level decision-making nor change attitudes towards the role of women ([Beath et al., 2013](#)). The social structures that need to be in place to support independent and single women are not yet established and the notion of an independent woman is still rejected culturally. Are claims to 'economically empower women' realistic in such a situation?

If gender is treated as a social relationship, then a critical understanding of 'patriarchy' would emerge. The literature suggests that this exposure would strongly jeopardize the accepted model of the benevolent patriarch and the submissive woman. While this may be true to a certain degree, there is also awareness about the value of consultation that women have power and can use it, and that decision-making may vary according to key aspects of the household economy and the nature of conjugal relations ([Pain, 2010](#)). Considering 'gender' or 'empowerment' as a development subject to tackle simplifies the relationships that govern male and female Afghan lives. The literature shows that these lives are complex and shaped by history, war, tribe, violence, location, tradition, development, policy, etc. 'Gender' deserves greater discussion, research and analysis.

Moreover, Afghan women are grossly misrepresented as oppressed and subordinated in a lot of the literature ([Hirschkind and Mahmood, 2002](#); [Fluri, 2011](#)). The burqa is often portrayed as a sign of this oppression but several articles ([Abu-Lughod, 2002](#); [Billaud, 2009](#); [Fluri, 2009](#); [Kandiyoti, 2007](#); [Khattak, 2004](#); [Moghadam, 2002](#); [Rostami Povey, 2004](#)) examine women's veiling practices, contradictory meanings and the complex ways women gain legitimacy in the public sphere. For [Papanek \(1982\)](#) the burqa liberates women by enabling them to move around in modesty while protecting them from unrelated men. [Abu-Lughod \(2002\)](#) explains, that the burqa is a "mobile home...

associated with the sanctity [and protection] of women". The burqa, or how women choose to dress, can have various meanings, many of which are misinterpreted in the literature and popular media ([McCann and Kim, 2017](#); [Fluri, 2011](#)). Therefore, Afghan women should be consulted more frequently in research and development.

[Ahmed-Ghosh \(2003\)](#) and [Zulfacar \(2006\)](#) question the motives behind the discourse that Afghan women need to be emancipated from the men in their lives. These authors contend that the real intentions behind women's empowerment programs are to undermine the control of Afghan men and to shake the stability of their communities. Similarly, [Fluri \(2011\)](#) questions the intentions of external governments who give money to Afghanistan by arguing that many women's empowerment programs seek to 'modernize' women as symbolic evidence of 'progress'. Donors and external governments view patriarchal norms as anachronistic and a cause of under-development. While good intentioned, this may not be the best approach to adopt if the aim is to empower women.

7 MASCULINITY: A MISSING CONVERSATION

The village and the household are the cornerstones of securing an allegiance for change, whether related to gender or other development topics. Yet, the normative gender and empowerment view, especially concerning economic empowerment, privileges individuality, agency and autonomy and engagement in a market economy. The household and local social context and the rules of honor, obligation and loyalty are necessary to the country's successful and sustained development, and particularly relevant to the promotion of gender equality ([Pain, 2010](#)).

Researching the ideas of Afghan men towards gender is rare. [Kabeer and Khan's \(2014\)](#) nuanced view brings the role of men and relationships to the fore. Dominant norms of masculinity and femininity are connected to identity and a sense of selfhood that is difficult to change ([Abu-Lughod, 2002](#)). Men embody power and enact certain roles in accordance with Islam such as 'breadwinner', decision maker, protector of women, head of the family, and occupiers of public space ([Wakefield, 2005](#)). However, women cannot be extracted from social relations and studied in isolation. Most of the available research on veiling, gender norms and women's subordination has been conducted by female researchers. There is a need to focus on social relations between the sexes and to understand masculinity as well as femininity better before intervening with development projects. [Bahri \(2014\)](#) found that the Afghan men resist gender equality in a variety of ways and that their points of view are ignored by development actors. Men's understanding of masculinity is essential to gender equality ([Bahri, 2014](#)).

Many policy changes have occurred in the last five to ten years. Government policy coexists with the customs and traditions of Sharia laws, which challenge

the idea of women's empowerment. Thus, it is important to understand if, and how, gender norms can change. Research found that, despite sex segregation and fixed gender roles, gender norms governing household relations are changing with rising access to information, education and awareness of women's rights (Tsegaye *et al.*, 2018). The Asia Foundation's 2016 survey found that "more Afghans, particularly rural Afghan men, support women's right to vote and women's right to work outside the home than ever before" (The Asia Foundation, 2016). This recent change shows that gender relations and norms are changing in Afghanistan.

Women at all levels of society undertook additional economic responsibilities when the men went to war. War changes social relations. Concurrently, gender equality projects increased along with a fast change in social relations. The international media coverage tended to focus on Afghan women under the Taliban, while ignoring Afghan men who were also victims of Taliban oppression (Gilani, 2008; Bahri, 2014). Organizations claiming to protect and safeguard women's rights and job security for women may do more harm by marginalizing men. Giving women economic opportunities when their husbands are unemployed or struggle to earn enough income to feed the family may emasculate men further (Gilani, 2008), and this would in turn lead to violence. A deeper understanding of Afghan men's identity, and of Islamic social and religious values, is required for change to prevail (Bahri, 2014).

So far, the literature review reveals the need for more in-depth analysis of household internal dynamics. Gender relations have been fluid throughout Afghanistan's history and should not be portrayed as static (Shalinsky, 1986; Smith, 2009). Importantly, more research on masculine identity construction is needed. This finding implicates researchers, development practitioners and the international media for all have a role to play in positively and negatively reframing and reimagining gender, and in doing so, contributing to effective development programs and women's empowerment.

8 CONCLUSION

This paper started by introducing the Afghanistan agriculture context and the role of wheat in the Afghan diet and economy. Conflict and drought have required households to implement flexible coping strategies, and to shape diverse livelihoods, often derived from multiple sources. Afghanistan faces the challenge of limited and scattered data; this paucity of information is further compounded by lack of security in (and therefore access to) certain areas of the country, and by gender norms that restrict women's mobility and women talking to non-kin men. In such a data poor context it is difficult to know if agriculture programs subordinate or empower women.

Women and their public and political participation tend to be the focus of development organizations,

rather than gender roles and relations. For example, the family and household remain centrally important for Afghan society (Fluri, 2011). Western notions of gender equality and female subordination are evident in the research and development practice. What Western development practitioners see as a negative form of dependency and subordination, is not conceived the same way in Afghanistan society. Development practitioners and the media need to take care to question their assumptions because the risk is that, by misunderstanding gender, more harm comes to women. Further research is needed to bring the worldviews and relationships of Afghan men and women into mainstream development practice.

The large literature gaps pose many questions for future research: How can gender relations change in a manner that empowers women and leads to fairer development? How is masculinity constructed in households with more equal gender relations? Which sectors have great potential to engage both men and women? Which are the structures and narratives, at the local, national and international level, that set out gendered constraints and opportunities for change? Moreover, what role does agriculture really play in a rural landowner's livelihood strategy and is this conceived differently by men and women? Answers to some of these questions may come from positive deviant studies; namely, studies of households that are more egalitarian.

This review has highlighted the role for independent researchers in Afghanistan, and more specifically, for feminist researchers who are aware of power relations and how these affect the research process, analysis and conclusions drawn. Too much development work in Afghanistan is based upon time-worn assumptions that may do more harm than good. Here is worth recalling the three research questions which this review aimed to explore:

- How does the world look, and work, for men and women in wheat growing households;
- What do we know about social relationships and mediating processes that exist in the prime wheat growing regions in Afghanistan;
- How do gender relations shape livelihood choices - including nutrition, food security and agriculture.

Due to the highlighted gaps in the available literature, it is not possible to answer these questions. However, there is room to make significant recommendations for future research.

Empowering women in Afghan's agriculture sector requires considerable experimentation, more data and contextually relevant, carefully designed programs. As Cornwall and Rivas (2015) purport "working with the interests that we have in common provides a far stronger basis for successful alliance building," than trying to convince people that gender equality or women's

empowerment matters to agriculture. This is a task well suited to a longer-term gender-focused research for development in agriculture (or rural livelihoods) project. This would require placing experienced gender researchers in country in order to build the capacity of local researchers for feminist methods and to help widely communicate the research findings.

NOTES

1. Brändlin, A-S. (2015). Ashraf Ghani: 'This is part of our shame'. DW date: 3.12.15.
2. Mediating processes are "formal and informal organizations and institutions with regularized practices or patterns of behavior that are structured by rules and norms of societies which have persistent use" (Scoones 1998:12).

ABBREVIATIONS

ANPDF: Afghanistan National Peace and Development Framework; **CSO:** Central Statistic Organization; **GDP:** Gross Domestic Product; **ODI:** Overseas Development Institute; **SDGs:** Sustainable Development Goals; **UNDP:** United Nations Development Programme.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This review received financial support of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, Germany under the project 'Understanding gender in wheat-based livelihoods for enhanced WHEAT R4D impact in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Ethiopia' implemented by **CIMMYT**.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors confirm that the content in this article has no conflict of interest.

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