A Mandate to Mainstream:
Promoting Gender Equality in Afghanistan

Anna Larson

AREU

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About the Author

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About the Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

AREU is an independent research organisation headquartered in Kabul. AREU's mission is to conduct high-quality research that informs and influences policy and practice. AREU also actively promotes a culture of research and learning by strengthening analytical capacity in Afghanistan and facilitating reflection and debate. Fundamental to AREU's vision is that its work should improve Afghan lives.

AREU was established in 2002 by the assistance community working in Afghanistan. Its board of directors includes representatives from donors, the UN and other multilateral agencies, and NGOs. AREU has recently received funding from: the European Commission; the governments of Denmark (DANIDA), the United Kingdom (DFID), Switzerland (SDC), Norway and Sweden (SIDA); the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR); the Government of Afghanistan's Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock; the World Bank; UNICEF; the Aga Khan Foundation; and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM).

Acknowledgements

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Acronyms

ANDS	Afghanistan National Development Strategy
AREU	Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit
BPFA	Beijing Platform for Action
CEDAW	Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women
CCCG	Cross-Cutting Consultative Group
CDCs	Community Development Committees
CG	Consultative Group
CSO	civil society organisation
EU	European Union
FDM	First Deputy Minister
FP	Facilitating Partner
FSR	Female Staff Representative
GBU	Gender Budgeting Unit
GoA	Government of Afghanistan
GTZ	German Agency for Technical Cooperation
GTZ-GM	German Agency for Technical Cooperation Gender Mainstreaming project
GU	Gender Unit
HIPC	Highly Indebted Poor Country
HR	Human Resources
I-ANDS	Interim Afghanistan National Development Strategy
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
IFI	international financial institutions

IMF	International Monetary Fund
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
MCN	Ministry of Counter Narcotics
MOC	Ministry of Commerce
MOE	Ministry of Education
MOF	Ministry of Finance
MOIA	Ministry of Interior Affairs
MOJ	Ministry of Justice
MOPH	Ministry of Public Health
MORR	Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation
MOWA	Ministry of Women's Affairs
MRRD	Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development
NABDP	National Area Based Development Programme
NAPWA	National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan
NGMS	National Gender Mainstreaming Secretariat
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NSP	National Solidarity Programme
PDPA	People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan
PRR	Priority Reform and Restructuring
PRSP	Poverty Strategy Reduction Paper
TOR	terms of reference
UN	United Nations
UNAMA	United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan

UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WID	Women in Development

Glossary

jensiyat   sex (but in Dari used interchangeably with gender)

khedmat   service provision, commonly used to mean patronage

kupan   ration coupons given to civil servants as part of their salary during the Soviet Era

rawabit   relations or connections; in the context of the ministries, usually refers to those with influential individuals who can be approached for favours in a patron-client fashion

tashkil   administrative structure of a ministry

wasita   an intermediary or representative providing strong recommendation or support to someone else; sometimes based on relations or payment

(women's) *shura*   usually informal staff association for women within a ministry, headed by an elected women's representative; in a more general context, *shura* refers to community meeting or discussion group

Wolesi Jirga   lower house of the Afghan Parliament

Technical Terms

gender[1]   Gender refers to the array of socially constructed roles and relationships, personality traits, attitudes, behaviours, values, relative power and influence that society ascribes to the two sexes on a differential basis. Whereas biological sex is determined by genetic and anatomical characteristics, gender is an acquired identity that is learned, changes over time, and varies widely within and across cultures. Gender refers not simply to women or men but to the relationship between them.

gender budgeting[2]   Gender budgeting is an application of gender mainstreaming in the budgetary process. It means a gender-based assessment of budgets, incorporating a gender perspective at all levels of the budgetary process and restructuring revenues and expenditures in order to promote gender equality.

gender equality[3]   Gender equality entails the concept that all human beings, both men and women, are free to develop their personal abilities and make choices without the limitations set by stereotypes, rigid gender roles, or prejudices. Gender equality means that

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1 Direct quotation taken from: UN INSTRAW, http://www.un-instraw.org/en/index.php?option=content&task=view&id=37&Itemid=76 (accessed 21 October 2007).

2 Direct quotation taken from: "Gender Budgeting," (Final Report of the Group of Specialists on Gender Budgeting, Council of Europe, 2004), 10. www.coe.int/equality/(accessed September 2008).

3 Direct quotation taken from: UN INSTRAW.

the different behaviours, aspirations and needs of women and men are considered, valued and favoured equally. It does not mean that women and men have to become the same, but that their rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female.[4]

gender equity[5]
Gender equity means fairness of treatment for women and men, according to their respective needs. This may include equal treatment or treatment that is different but considered equivalent in terms of rights, benefits, obligations and opportunities. In the development context, a gender equity goal often requires built-in measures to compensate for the historical and social disadvantages of women.

gender mainstreaming
Gender mainstreaming is the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in any area and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and social spheres, such that inequality between men and women is not perpetuated.[6]

According to the Government of Afghanistan's Gender Mainstreaming Policy, gender mainstreaming also requires the actual participation and leadership of women.[7]

horizontal positioning
This term is used to refer to the position of a unit or department within the operational structure of a ministry *tashkil*. For example, if a department has involvement in the work and operations of many other departments, it can be considered horizontally influential. One department which is horizontally influential in most ministry structures is the policy and planning department, which usually has a widespread influence across a ministry. If a department is confined to one particular part of a ministry, and has little or no effect on the work of other departments in the ministry, it has a limited horizontal position. This paper recommends that gender units or other gender mechanisms are horizontally influential, and located in a policy and planning department which has influence over the work of the ministry as a whole.

integrative/ technical gender mainstreaming
This is an approach to gender mainstreaming which attempts to insert gender equality concerns into existing structures for development. As such, it promotes small, bureaucratic and technical changes within development policy to promote gender equality, and does not often challenge established norms and values. It is usually implemented and imposed through Western/Northern influence over development policy. This kind of gender mainstreaming is relatively easy to implement as it does not require substantial change, but results remain incremental and take longer to

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4   In this paper the terms "gender equality" and "gender equity" are both used. "Gender equality" signifies a long-term, transformative goal to which the GoA can aspire, whereas the word 'gender equity' is used to indicate a developmental mechanism through which gains can be made towards improving gender equality. In quotations and names of documents, such as the Cross Cutting Strategy for Gender Equity, the original terms as used by the GoA are utilised.

5   Direct quotation taken from: UN INSTRAW.

6   Direct quotation taken from: UN INSTRAW.

7   Government of Afghanistan, Gender Mainstreaming Policy, Annex A, p103.

become apparent. Most gender mainstreaming initiatives are approached in this way.[8]

sex[9]	Sex refers to the biological characteristics which define humans as female or male.
transformative gender mainstreaming	Transformative gender mainstreaming is a more radical approach, and "uses gender perspectives to transform the existing development agenda". New institutions are set up in order to ensure that gender equality is a key goal of development initiatives. Ideally, this approach to gender mainstreaming comes from a partnership between actors from both developed and developing countries. According to Kathleen Staudt, this approach is ambitious, but likely to generate visible change in a shorter time. While there are few real examples of transformative mainstreaming actually taking place, adopting a transformative attitude towards mainstreaming (and engaging national actors in doing so) can promote the idea that gender equality should be a principal goal of development initiatives.[10]
vertical positioning	This term is used to refer to the position of a unit or department within the hierarchy of a ministry *tashkil*. For example, if a department is directly supervised by a deputy minister or other position of authority, it has a high or influential vertical position. If there are many levels of authority or hierarchy between a department and the most senior levels of the ministry, the department has a low or relatively uninfluential vertical position. This paper recommends that gender units or other gender mechanisms are closely connected to senior authorities so that they hold influential vertical positions in a ministry's *tashkil*.
working group + 1	This is a technical recommendation put forward by this paper as a way in which to improve the influence and reach of gender mainstreaming activities. Gender working groups in ministries have the potential to be horizontally influential because they are made up of representatives from many different departments. Decisions made in gender working groups could influence the work of many departments through their representatives attending the group. However, usually gender working groups are not part of the ministry *tashkil*, and do not have vertical connections to senior staff members. Their decision-making ability is limited. For this reason, they should be partnered by another gender mechanism such as a gender unit or influential individual, which holds a vertically influential position within the *tashkil* and which is able to provide decision-making authority to gender working group discussions. As such, the working group + 1 suggestion combines influential horizontal and influential vertical positioning.

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8   Staudt originally drew the distinction between integrative and transformative gender mainstreaming in: Kathleen Staudt, "Bringing Politics Back In: Institutional Contexts for Mainstreaming," in *Policy, Politics & Gender: Women Gaining Ground,* 177-190 (West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1998).

9   Direct quotation taken from: UN INSTRAW.

10   Staudt, "Bringing Politics Back In."

Executive Summary

This paper contends that gender mainstreaming, as the government's principal strategy for promoting gender equality in Afghanistan, is not being substantively implemented in the Administration at present. Equality is an ambitious, transformative goal, but efforts to achieve this end through mainstreaming gender issues have been (as in other contexts) largely incremental. This paper explores possible reasons for this and gives recommendations as to how mainstreaming, as a potentially valuable tool, could be more effectively executed.

Members of the civil service widely perceive gender mainstreaming as policy imported from outside the country, and do not generally feel they have ownership of its implementation. The word "gender" itself does not translate into Dari or Pashto, and thus is generally considered foreign terminology. This is characteristic of many other aspects of the state-building process in Afghanistan, however, and the lack of translation itself does not significantly obstruct the implementation of gender mainstreaming.

This implementation could be further encouraged in various ways. Some of these became evident through a comprehensive analysis of gender mechanisms in six case study ministries: Counter Narcotics, Education, Interior Affairs, Justice, Public Health and Rural Rehabilitation and Development.

The paper begins with an introduction to gender mainstreaming as a global movement. It continues with a discussion of the introduction of gender mainstreaming to Afghanistan through a process of policy transfer and of local perceptions of gender itself within Afghan ministries. It is then divided into two further sections: technical concerns and institutional contexts.

Technical concerns

The Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) and National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) considerably emphasise gender as a cross-cutting issue. In spite of this, technical factors currently limit the efficacy of existing mechanisms (such as gender units, women's *shuras* and working groups) within ministries. These factors include: the ways in which gender mechanisms are functioning, their structural positions and influence within ministries and, crucially, their relationships to each other. The paper also considers the role of interministerial mechanisms — such as the National Gender Machinery Secretariat (NGMS), focal points and the Gender Budgeting Unit in the Ministry of Finance (MOF) — along with that of international technical advisors. Substantially more remains to be done technically and structurally to encourage gender mainstreaming at the ministerial level. Better coordination among mechanisms (and indeed among the international agencies that initiate them) could itself provide the basis for significant improvement. However, an analysis of mechanisms and their technical challenges alone is not sufficient to understand why gender mainstreaming is not substantively taking place in ministries. An in-depth exploration of institutional contexts is also required.

Institutional contexts

To come to informed conclusions regarding the status of gender mainstreaming in ministries, gender mechanisms should be situated within their specific institutional contexts. This research highlights three examples of institutional cultures existing within ministries — those of welfare expectations, *khedmat/wasita*[1] and perceptions of gendered hierarchies. The research finds that an examination of these institutional cultures provides key insights into the factors affecting the implementation of gender mainstreaming. This paper analyses measures of institutional reform (such as Priority Reform and Restructuring, positive discrimination and gender workshops). At present, these measures often constitute a new set of

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1   Similar concepts in Dari: *khedmat* meaning service provision or patronage; *wasita* meaning a representative providing support and sometimes based on relations or payment.

overlapping cultures superposed onto those already existing. Functioning in parallel to established "rules of the game," they are significantly limited in their efficacy. An analysis of technical and institutional factors reveals that while both influence gender mainstreaming in different ways, the potential success of mainstreaming in ministries depends on the active political will of influential figures (both national and international). Without this, efforts to mainstream gender concerns will remain token phrases in national policy documents such as the ANDS.

Recommendations

To more effectively implement gender mainstreaming, this paper recommends the following to the Government of Afghanistan (GoA), to individual line ministries and to international actors:

- National policy on gender, **Afghanistan National Development Strategy —** Future reviews of the ANDS must further clarify its stance on promoting both gender equality and the role of women in the public sector. Provisions for gender budgeting (a tool used to assess the gendered impacts of government expenditure) should be more comprehensively included in ANDS budgeting processes, particularly in sector strategies. Gender benchmarks in the ANDS need to be further clarified and their meanings made more explicit. These should be accompanied by clear implementation strategies.

- **Gender-specific policy documents** — Current documents include the NAPWA, ANDS Gender Equity Cross Cutting Strategy and specific sections of the ANDS final document. The demands for transformative social change in gender relations in these documents are presently too expansive. While their overarching vision is certainly grounded in the need to promote gender equality in Afghanistan, the un-focused prescriptions they contain detract from targeted, implementable strategies that might be put in place. Further, few suggestions deal with how gender-sensitive policies might be

monitored. These strategies must be refocused during the review process due to take place a year after their ratification.

Technical factors

The term "technical factors" is used in this paper to refer to structural and programmatic issues that relate to gender mainstreaming in ministries. These include the way in which gender mechanisms (such as gender units, gender working groups, gender advisors and women's *shuras*) function and relate to one another. Key issues here are these mechanisms' positions in ministry *tashkils*, and the need for vertical connections to senior figures as well as horizontal (operational) influence across all ministry departments. The following recommendations relate to these areas:

- **Gender units and women's *shuras* —** Both units and *shuras* have the potential to be useful in furthering gender equality in ministries in different ways. However, their mandates need to be clarified and separated from one another in practice, not just on paper. Both kinds of mechanisms require positions in *tashkils* in order to potentially increase their influence in ministries. Giving these mechanisms official positions within a ministry's organisational structure would demonstrate upper-level support for gender issues. These positions need to be strategically chosen according to individual ministry *tashkils* and be distinguishable from each other. They need to be both vertically and horizontally influential, but also relevant to the terms of reference of each mechanism. For example, a women's *shura* could be established within the human resources department of a ministry and the gender unit placed under policy and planning. A system for detailed monitoring and evaluation of the work and progress of these units will need to be established.

- **Working groups** — Interdepartmental working groups have the potential to significantly strengthen the mainstreaming agenda operationally within ministries. They, however, rarely have vertical influence within ministries due to a lack of position within ministerial

tashkils and corresponding absence of official high-level support. As such, they have little policy-making authority. A working group + 1 model should be encouraged by creating working groups to exist alongside vertically influential mechanisms (such as a well-placed gender unit or influential gender advisor). Once established, the coordination between a working group and a suitable support mechanism in any given ministry should receive considerable attention. This model provides the flexibility necessary to adapt to the significantly different structures of individual ministries.

• **Interministerial mechanisms** — Respondents working within the NGMS currently view it as a coordinating body for gender mainstreaming efforts across ministries. This paper contends that it has the potential to be effective as such. Further, it should form the central core of governmental policy and planning on gender issues. To do this, it will need to become established as a recognised body within national government, whether within the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA) or preferably in a more influential location such as the Presidential Office. It must be considered the one mechanism to which all agencies working on gender policy, national and international, could be effectively held accountable. The NGMS has the potential to strengthen MOWA's role in supporting mainstreaming in other ministries.

Gender focal points are not functioning effectively at present and provide little more than a largely redundant gender mechanism to add to the list. With a more clearly articulated mandate and a greater sense of accountability to the base ministry, they could potentially be more effective, but at present focal points remain nominal in their contribution to gender mainstreaming. The Gender Budgeting Unit in the MOF will be a key tool in encouraging other ministries to mainstream gender into policies and programmes, but it needs to be established under the MOF budgeting department in order to have greater reach and influence. Furthermore, the processes through which ministries obtain funds for gender-related programmes should be clarified and widely communicated to those

preparing budget forms for the MOF.

Interdepartmental mechanisms in ministries have the potential to be effective, provided that they have strong connections to senior policy makers within the ministry structure and that their relationships to existing mechanisms, such as gender units, are clarified.

• **Technical advisors** — Additional, much-improved coordination of the work of technical advisors will be fundamental as a means to promote and generate support for gender mainstreaming at the donor level. It should, however, be clearly emphasised that their presence is not financially or operationally sustainable. A strengthened focus on capacity-building is necessary to promote the longevity of mainstreaming initiatives. Mainstreaming will continue to be seen as an international appendage to the Afghan administration until sufficient capacity and political will has been generated within ministries themselves.

Institutional factors

• **Institutional attitudes** — It should not be assumed that attitudes of ministry staff towards gender equality are wholly negative. While a culture of male priority and dominance exists, there is a recognised need to emphasise women's public roles.

Through this study, it also becomes clear that attempts to promote gender mainstreaming will need to be put forward within an Islamic framework, given that gender issues are considered by the majority of respondents to be inseparable from religious principles. Without engaging in an Afghan-Islamic discourse, gender mainstreaming attempts will remain incremental and lose any chance of pushing a transformative agenda. Efforts to explore gender issues using this approach have already been initiated by agencies such as GTZ-GM[2] and UNIFEM.[3]

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2   This is the acronym for the German Agency for Technical Cooperation, Gender Mainstreaming project.

3   GTZ-GM's efforts involve presenting seminars on gender and

- **"Women's problems"** — It will be necessary to dissect the notion of "women's problems," a blanket phrase used frequently by respondents. This could help avoid the blurring of gender equality with welfare concerns. These concerns tend to strengthen stereotypes of female staff as a needy, marginalised group of people who should be celebrated once a year on International Women's Day. Whether a focus on women only (as opposed to gender mainstreaming) is considered appropriate or not, associating women with welfare stereotypes is not conducive to the furthering of a rights-based agenda. It is recommended that discussion groups within ministries, perhaps jointly facilitated by a gender mechanism and HR department, are formed to identify these problems, explore them further and seek to adequately address them. This participatory process by itself could be empowering to those taking part.

- **Strengthening of institutions** — The promotion of gender mainstreaming depends on the existence of fully-operational governmental institutions — a prerequisite that is lacking in Afghanistan's post-conflict context. If the GoA and international actors are indeed committed to the successful promotion of gender mainstreaming, a greater financial, technical and political commitment to strengthen institutions such as line ministries will be necessary. Furthermore, the processes through which this strengthening takes place need to be re-assessed, with greater emphasis on capacity-building of national staff.

- **Positive discrimination** — Measures of positive discrimination currently employed in Afghanistan are not adequate to combat gender inequalities. These measures could be — and have been — detrimental to the mainstreaming agenda when not combined with clear policies on how ministries should provide equal opportunities for their female staff. Rather than basic positive discrimination purely to increase numbers of women, a holistic approach embodied in a substantive mainstreaming agenda is necessary. For example, all systems, policies, programmes and services should be made gender sensitive.

- **Workshops** — The practice of raising awareness through workshops perpetuates the notions that: gender can be "done" in a series of short sessions; and resistance that might be found stems from ignorance rather than underlying institutional cultures. Furthermore, since gender is an abstract concept, it cannot easily be applied to the work and attitudes of ministry staff. If workshops must still be used as a method, they should not be specifically focused on gender. Instead, gender issues should be integrated into other training courses for ministry staff (such as in management, leadership, team-building) with practical suggestions on how to approach these subjects in a gender-sensitive manner.

- **Active political will** — Without harnessing the active political will of influential champions of gender issues, it will not be effective to improve technical amenability to gender mainstreaming or to attempt to reform institutional cultures. A concerted effort should be made to gain the political support of both national and international senior authorities for the promotion of a substantive gender equality agenda. This could involve further lobbying of members of Parliament, civil society organisations and key international donors to strengthen support for gender equality in government policy and programmes. Finally and fundamentally, it is the responsibility of the GoA, and of its leaders in particular, to ensure that its written commitment in the GoA Gender Mainstreaming Policy to promote gender equality is supported by its activities and practices.

Islam. UNIFEM has plans to work with the Ministry of Haj and Religious Affairs.

1.   Introduction

Gender mainstreaming is identified in the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) as the Government of Afghanistan's (GoA) principal strategy for achieving gender equality in Afghanistan. Accordingly, mechanisms in national policy have been established, for example, the inclusion of gender equity as an ANDS cross-cutting theme and the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA).

Tried, tested and widely recommended as global best practice, gender mainstreaming is an example of policy transferred across different national contexts and has been added to the mix of international prescriptions for rebuilding the Afghan state. This study explores the ways that mainstreaming, as a policy imported from outside the country, is being implemented in Afghanistan. It examines whether it could be useful or effective as one of various means to further gender equality.[4] In order to discuss the process of gender mainstreaming in Afghanistan, this paper also examines perceptions of the concept of gender among staff in government ministries and among external agencies' representatives working alongside the GoA in this field.

This paper uses data collected in six of Afghanistan's line ministries; in these ministries since 2001, technical mechanisms such as gender units, gender working groups, steering committees and focal points have been created alongside pre-existing women's *shuras*. There is a considerable need for gender issues to be addressed more substantively in ministry policy and strategies. The data from this study, though, indicate that the current contribution to this end of these mechanisms and

the coordination among them is limited. At present, gender mainstreaming efforts have come up against a stasis in ministries. In order to ascertain why, an analysis of technical concerns for the promotion of gender mainstreaming focuses on the positions of these mechanisms within ministry administrative structures — *tashkils* — and the relationships among different mechanisms in a given ministry.

An assessment of these technical and structural challenges, however, only offers a relatively superficial explanation of why gender mainstreaming may or may not be functioning in Afghan ministries. A more holistic understanding of the situation can be gained from combining this technical approach with institutional analysis. Attempts to mainstream gender in Afghan ministries currently play out within very specific institutional environments, made up of a variety of overlapping and often parallel institutional cultures in which differing rules and norms apply. Such environments contribute to the inertia against which mainstreaming efforts have been trying to move and contribute to the many factors currently hindering successful implementation. This paper explores the institutional contexts within the six case study ministries and focuses on three kinds of institutional cultures (expectation of welfare provisions, *khedmat/wasita* and institutionalised gender hierarchies) that currently exist within them. It also assesses various reforms that have recently been implemented in an attempt to strengthen these ministries as institutions.

Underpinning the analysis of both technical and institutional factors, however, is the fact that, of course, no ministry works in isolation. The institutional contexts of different ministries only reflect the broader sociopolitical terrain of which they are a part; therefore, efforts to promote gender equality contend not only with potential resistance from within the contained cultures of ministries. Gender mainstreaming as a strategy always interacts (and often conflicts) with concrete political contexts. As such, prevailing trends in political will may well determine whether gender mainstreaming does or does not take hold. As a means

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4   Anne-Marie Goetz has argued that effective policy change promoting women's empowerment is contingent on three factors: the nature of advocacy for gender equality within civil society, the political system and party organisation, and the way in which the state itself functions. This paper deals only with the latter of these factors, due to its primary focus on gender mainstreaming within the state administrative system. This is not to say that the other two factors do not affect the promotion of equality within ministries, but it is currently beyond the scope of this paper to focus on these areas in great detail. See Anne-Marie Goetz and Shireen Hassim, *No Shortcuts to Power: African Women in Politics and Policy Making* (London: Zed Books, 2003).

to situate the above discussion of mainstreaming in ministries, issues of political will are more broadly discussed in this paper.

This study contends that, while the outcomes of gender mainstreaming through government policy are potentially valuable to promoting gender equality, efforts to mainstream gender have had little effect to date. This is seen as cause for remedial action. To emphasise the potential contribution of gender mainstreaming to achieving gender equality, this paper provides policy recommendations for more effectively implementing gender mainstreaming at the ministry level.

2.   Methodology

Original reasons for conducting the study

This study was conceptualised in 2007 as part of AREU's existing interest in gender issues at the national level in Afghanistan. The imminent ratification of the NAPWA by senior Afghan policymakers was also significant in determining the topic of the research. After an initial concept note had been drafted, UNIFEM approached AREU with a proposal to assess gender mainstreaming initiatives in line ministries. Terms of reference (TOR) were developed which incorporated the specifications of both organisations. The study was designed as a two-phase research project, to take place over the course of one year. The AREU gender team designed the methodological framework for the study. This was left flexible to allow for any changes that might need to be made in the second phase of the study as a result of lessons learned from the first.

Methodological decisions taken

Data for this study were collected in two distinct six-month phases. Conducting the research in this manner allowed knowledge and methodological problems uncovered during the first phase to be respectively built upon and amended in the second. Roundtable discussions were held with stakeholders at the end of the first phase and some of the feedback received during these was incorporated into the research in the second phase.

Each phase of research focused data collection in three case-study ministries. This allowed enough time to gain an in-depth understanding of the way in which each ministry functioned. The six case study ministries were selected (from a possible 25) to represent a range of sectors. The MCN, MOE, MOIA, MOJ, MOPH and MRRD[5] are also very different in institutional structure and carry differing stereotypes concerning their perceived connection to gender issues. Three of the ministries,

which happened to be selected for the first phase, had established gender units and three (those in the second phase) had not. However, having an established gender unit did not determine whether ministries were chosen, or which ministries were selected for each phase. Rather, ministries were selected according to the reach of their programmes and their essential remits. Having stated this, the fact that phase one ministries had gender units and phase two ministries did not made for a useful point of comparison when analysing the data. While other ministries (such as MOF, MOC and MORR[6]) had also established gender units, they were not selected on these grounds. Due to a preference for quality over quantity, not all ministries could be included in the study.

The Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA) plays a central role in facilitating ministerial gender mainstreaming and thus was an obvious addition to the other six ministries, although it was not treated as a case study in itself. Finally, three members of staff in the MOF were also interviewed in order to gain a basic perspective on how decisions made in this ministry affect the ways the others function.

From the outset, this study has focussed on exploring the perspectives of Afghan ministry staff on gender issues and gender mainstreaming initiatives as they are currently playing out. Useful background data on the introduction and formation of these initiatives has been collected from international sources, also. The study did not intend to relate the accounts of those people conventionally perceived as "most knowledgeable," such as international technical advisors, but instead sought to establish an understanding of how gender mainstreaming is currently implemented in ministries from the viewpoint of various ministry staff members. While a number of ministry policy and programme documents served as reference points for the study, national policy documents were given greater emphasis because they are a key subject of

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5   Respectively, these acronyms stand for: Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development, Ministry of Interior Affairs, Ministry of Public Health, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Counter Narcotics.

6   Respectively, these acronyms stand for: Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Commerce, and Ministry of Refugees and Repatriation.

current debate. A detailed comparison of different ministries' programme documents and their content on gender issues could be an area for future study.

Ministerial respondents were selected according to their position in a ministry, to interview the widest possible range of individuals. In the first phase of the study, lists of (usually high or mid-ranking) respondents in all three ministries were selected for the research team by senior ministry staff, limiting the range of staff levels included in the data set. In the second phase, ministry officials also guided the research team as to whom they could interview, but the team placed greater emphasis on the need to interview staff at a variety of levels. As a result, the data set in phase two spans a wider spectrum of staff positions in the ministries.

Permission from the deputy minister or minister of each ministry was acquired before any interviews were undertaken. All interviews were conducted individually, and consent forms were presented in Dari and English explaining the purpose of the study and guaranteeing anonymity. Each respondent was asked if they would prefer to be referred to by their job description or more generally by the ministry in which they work.

In phase one, the research team interviewing respondents consisted of two people — one Afghan (Saghar Wafa) and one British (Anna Larson). In phase two, rather than have an international researcher present for ministry interviews, both members of the research team were Afghan, one male (Ali Hassan Fahimi) and one female (Saghar Wafa). This allowed for longer interviews and also a different kind of data gathered.[7] Interviewees chose from Dari, Pashto or English for the interview language.

ATLAS.ti qualitative analysis software was used to organise primary data. A comprehensive coding system was designed to sort and categorise statements within interview transcripts into particular themes and codes. This process not only enabled the analyses of data but also allowed the researcher to draw parallels among the responses of different groups of respondents (men, women, national, international, etc). Codes were established during the process of analysis rather than prior to this stage, allowing for themes to be drawn from the data and not assumed in advance by the researcher.

Initial assumptions

The research team made various assumptions at the beginning of this study, and it is necessary to detail these before noting how they were challenged over the course of the data analysis. These assumptions primarily concerned how gender and gender mainstreaming were received by those working in the case study ministries.

It was assumed, for example, that ministry staff would not feel they truly had ownership of either the term "gender" or the concept of gender mainstreaming, and that they would consider these essentially as foreign imports to the Afghan context. It was also assumed that female staff would have been targeted by international agencies as recipients for gender training more than their male colleagues; this would have resulted in women respondents being more familiar with gender terminology than male members of staff. It was thought that staff officially working on gender issues in ministries would have a greater understanding of the concepts of gender and gender mainstreaming than their colleagues working in other fields. A third preconception of the research team was that staff in phase one ministries — those with gender units — would have a greater awareness of gender issues than those in phase two ministries, which have not yet established such units. An underlying assumption was that gender mainstreaming was not functioning effectively in ministries, and that this was partly due to its status as a foreign import to the Afghan administration. These assumptions (and the ways in which they were challenged) will be referred to throughout the paper, but they are compared to results of the data analysis in Section 2.3.

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7   When looking at the data collected retrospectively, comparing both phases, it is possible to note a distinct difference in the ways in which respondents answered questions. In general interviews tend to flow better in Phase Two, and take the form of conversations as opposed to interviews. This conversational approach was sought after in Phase one also, but was not as satisfactorily achieved due to interruptions for translation and a generally more stilted interview format.

Table 1: Sampling design outline for semi-structured interviews

	"Gender" staff	Staff not working on gender issues	Ministers/ Deputy Ministers	International advisors and stakeholders	Key informants	Total women	Total men	Total interviews
MRRD	2	10		1	3	8	5	13
MOPH	2	7	1	1	2	4	6	10
MOIA	1	8	1	2	2	4	7	11
MOWA	2	9	1	7	5	15	3	18
Total Phase 1	7	34	3	11	12	31	21	52
MOJ	2	10	1	2	3	4	10	14
MOE	2	9		1	2	8	4	12
MCN	1	10	1	0	1	4	7	11
MOF	1	2		0	1	0	3	3
NGMS	2	0		0	2	1	1	2
Total Phase 2	6	31	2	3	9	17	25	42
TOTAL Phases 1&2	13	65	5	14	21	48	46	94

Key

"Gender" staff — Members of ministry staff whose job descriptions are largely concerned with gender-based activities or who hold informal positions relating to these activities in addition to their formal role. Examples include staff in a gender unit or section, women's representatives or focal persons for gender issues within a ministry.

"Staff not working on gender issues" — Members of ministry staff whose TOR or job description does not directly refer to gender-based activities, and who do not hold informal positions relating to these activities. Examples include staff in administrative, planning or financial departments within a ministry.

Ministers/Deputy Ministers

International advisors/stakeholders — Members of the international community whose TOR or job description involves encouraging gender-based activities within meetings, those who fund these activities, or those who are involved in the implementation of processes in which gender-sensitivity or awareness is a written requirement. Examples include international gender consultants, donors and those implementing processes of the ANDS.

Key informants — Individuals from the above four categories (but largely "gender" staff and internationals) whose knowledge of the gender mechanisms in any ministry is substantial and can be considered reliable (based on extensive experience working with these mechanisms)

Note: Categories in the first five columns overlap and, hence, total more than 94. For example, deputy ministers are also considered "staff not working on gender issues." Furthermore, seven sets of field notes from gender meetings and informal conversations (where verbatim notes were not taken) were added to the data set for analysis.

Factors affecting the data

The identity of the researchers, and how they are perceived by respondents, affects what is said and not said in an interview. In phase one of the study, for example, the presence of a foreign researcher may have limited responses due to a respondent's uncertainty concerning the study or suspicion of international activities in Afghanistan in general. More frequently, however, it appeared that respondents were comfortable speaking to the researcher and at times explained statements in detail on the assumption that they were unfamiliar with the socio-political context of Afghanistan. In phase two, the interviews — conducted solely by Afghan researchers — could have resulted in respondents referring to different subjects, being more or less willing to talk about sensitive issues, talking for longer periods of time, and being less concerned about explaining statements in detail. It is difficult to speculate the precise ways in which this methodological change affected the data collected, other than the fact that interviews in phase two became distinctly more conversational in style.

In any interpretation from one language to another, at least a small part of the original meaning will be lost. This limitation was — to some extent — controlled for in phase one by the researcher checking all transcripts with the research assistants who had been present in interviews. In phase two, the research assistants conducting interviews checked transcripts with each other in order to ensure that as much information as possible from interviews was accurately recorded and translated.

Finally, it should be emphasised that this study uses qualitative research techniques that focus on different perceptions and interpretations of events. These perceptions and interpretations vary from one respondent to another. This study attempts to extract meaning from such data through a comprehensive analysis of interview transcripts.

3. Context

3.1 Mainstreaming as a global movement

Gender mainstreaming was first conceptualised as a means of bringing about gender equity in the 1980s when it was becoming apparent that measures such as Women in Development (WID) units within national government systems were not meeting the expectations of the international women's movement.[8] Often marginalised and underfunded, these separate mechanisms had simply been unable to penetrate mainstream development policy.[9] As such, a new mechanism was needed, and one that would facilitate the institutionalisation of a gender agenda within all sectors of public policymaking. Mainstreaming was introduced as a way to do this. Mainstreaming involves a cross-sectoral approach that, as Eva Fodor writes, "simply means that the objective of gender equality must be explicitly integrated into all social and economic policy, rather than being handled in isolation."[10] It also highlights the importance of women's participation at the decision-making level.[11]

At the 1995 UN World Conference on Women in Beijing, national governments pledged or were pressured by their Beijing representatives to create high-level mechanisms through which gender mainstreaming could be promoted. The Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) emphasised a

strengthened focus on gender mainstreaming.[12] This document outlined three strategic objectives for achieving this: create or strengthen national machineries and other governmental bodies; integrate gender perspectives in legislation, public policies, programmes and projects; and, generate and disseminate gender-disaggregated data and information for planning and evaluation.[13] As a cumulative result of policies recommended by the BPFA at Beijing and other UN world conferences on women,[14] mainstreaming has fast become global best practice in terms of improving the gender-sensitivity of macro-level policy making.[15]

Of those writing on the subject of gender mainstreaming,[16] Kathleen Staudt has contributed a notable means of conceptualising different forms of the strategy, making the distinction between integrational and transformative mainstreaming approaches (see Box 1). She argues that the integrational, bureaucratic and depoliticised application of mainstreaming in reality is far removed from the transformative, feminist theory from which it is derived.[17] This coincides with the wider

8   This was highlighted at the Nairobi Women's Conference in 1985, as documented in Sally Baden and Anne-Marie Goetz, "Who Needs [Sex] When You Can Have [Gender]? Conflicting Discourses of Gender at Beijing," *Feminist Review* no. 56 (Summer 1997): 4-5.

9   Anne-Marie Goetz, . "Mainstreaming Gender Equity to National Development Planning," in *Missionaries and Mandarins,* eds. Carol Miller and Shahrashoub Razavi. (IT Publications, 1998), 42.

10   Eva Fodor, "Gender Mainstreaming and its consequences in the European Union," *The Analyst*, http://www.euractiv.com/en/socialeurope/analysis-gender-mainstreaming-consequences-european-union/article-158020 (accessed 6 March 2008): 1.

11   Fodor, "Gender Mainstreaming," 62, and Government of Afghanistan "Gender Mainstreaming Policy," *NAPWA*, Annex A, 103.

12   Information taken from The United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing, China, 1995), http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/institu.htm (accessed 13 October 2007).

13   UN Fourth Conference on Women.

14   The first of these was held in Mexico city in 1975, followed by Copenhagen in 1980, Nairobi in 1985 and Beijing in 1995, to name a few. For more information, see Geum-Joo Bae "Reviewing United Nations Conference on Women for Korean Women's Empowerment" (unpublished Masters thesis, Maryland University, 2004) https://drum.umd.edu/dspace/bitstream/1903/1541/1/umi-umd-1332.pdf (accessed June 2008).

15   Jacqui True and Michael Mintrom, "Transnational Networks and Policy Diffusion: The Case of Gender Mainstreaming," *International Studies Quarterly*, 45, no. 1 (2001): 27-57.

16   For further reading please see the special issue on Gender Mainstreaming of *Gender and Development*, 13, no. 2 (*2005)* and Hilary Standing, "Gender, Myth and Fable: The Perils of Mainstreaming in Sector Bureaucracies," *IDS Bulletin* 35, no. 4 (2004): 82-88.

17   Kathleen Staudt, "Bringing Politics Back In: Institutional Contexts

Box 1: Mainstreaming — integrational or transformative?

In Kathleen Staudt's analysis there is a distinction between integrational and transformative gender mainstreaming. The following are the key characteristics of each, according to Staudt:

Integrational/technical

- "Builds gender issues within existing development paradigms"

- Northern dialogue over development (i.e. imposed by international policymakers)

- Less effective — easier to implement but with incremental results that take longer to become apparent

Transformative/agenda-setting

- "Uses gender perspectives to transform the existing development agenda"

- Development dialogue aimed at North-South partnership

- Ambitious — difficult to implement but generates notable change in a shorter time once institutions have been established

Source: Kathleen Staudt, "Bringing politics back in: Institutional Contexts for Mainstreaming," in Policy, Politics & Gender: Women Gaining Ground (West Hartford, Conn., Kumarian Press, 1998), 177-190.

position on the efficacy of gender mainstreaming as a tool: that an integrational form of mainstreaming can dilute efforts to promote gender equality by being channelled through lengthy bureaucratic processes. Staudt clearly states, however, that an integrational (often called "technical") method can also produce results. Indeed, she emphasises that an approach which is moulded into existing bureaucratic frameworks can strategically institutionalise the process of mainstreaming in a relatively short time; this does not require the creation of new, specialised institutions (see Box 1). According to Staudt, "technical approaches can protect and sustain women's gains when prevailing

political winds would undermine them."[18]

Conversely, in her examination of gender mainstreaming and its Soviet precursors in EU member states, Fodor argues that the goal of attaining gender equity is categorically unachievable if prevailing systems of government (capitalist or communist) are not entirely reformed. Discussing EU policy on gender mainstreaming in post-Soviet European states, she compares former Soviet and current EU approaches to gender in state policies, concluding that neither have taken gender interests on board in a truly transformative way.[19]

18   Staudt, "Bringing Politics Back In," 179.

19   There is more to be said on the comparison between these two approaches and their relevance to the Afghan context. This is discussed

for Mainstreaming," in *Policy, Politics & Gender: Women Gaining Ground,* 177-190 (West Hartford, CT: Kumarian Press, 1998).

The case presented by Fodor is not, however, about a state under pressure from internal activist groups to mainstream gender into its institutions and policymaking processes. Instead, the directive explored in Fodor's study comes from above in the form of mandatory conditions for EU member states. Here parallels can be drawn between cases of gender mainstreaming in post-Soviet Europe and those in developing states, particularly those attempting to obtain HIPC status in order to receive concessional loans from international financial institutions (IFIs). Provisions of financial aid, for example, in Poverty Strategy Reduction Paper (PRSP) processes have often been conditional upon ostensibly gender-equitable (among other) benchmarks.[20] These benchmarks are often tokenistic in nature, and attention paid to their monitoring and evaluation is often significantly lacking. For example, in Ann Whitehead's comparison of the way in which gender issues are raised in the PRSPs of four countries (Tanzania, Bolivia, Malawi and Yemen), commitments to these issues are found to be insubstantial, superficial and low-priority.[21] Implementation of these benchmarks can also remain highly dependent on the levels of receptiveness to gender equality initiatives within the recipient country. However, as Fodor points out, the required political will is not always present and, further, there may well be opposing "political winds"[22] that would negate in implementation any gains made in formal policy.[23]

The studies conducted by Staudt, Fodor and

Whitehead clearly demonstrate that international donors, IFIs in particular, are often unwilling to promote a transformative or controversial stance with regard to gender issues. Indeed, this makes the distinction between integrational and transformative approaches somewhat misleading. Staudt's notion of transformative mainstreaming is more of an ideal that is set against the norm of integrational approaches.[24] Donor reluctance to push a transformative gender agenda is apparent in the case of Afghanistan (see Section 2.2). This paper explores the technical, integrative measures currently in place at the national level in Afghanistan; it also assesses whether these have the potential to transform current institutional systems, albeit through incremental means.

3.2 Gender mainstreaming in Afghanistan

IFI approaches to gender mainstreaming within state-building parameters

The Afghan state is currently undergoing a high-profile process of rebuilding and restructuring.[25] This follows nearly three decades of conflict, which destroyed much of the existing infrastructure as well as social and political capital. The cumulative effects of this conflict, along with the more recent resurgence of antigovernment groups, continue to hinder the development of the State. National and international actors involved in state-building processes, along with their varying political agendas, are plentiful. It is within this context that gender mainstreaming is taking place, being one of many internationally prescribed mechanisms for the institutional reform of the Afghan State.

In its Interim Strategy Note for Afghanistan (2007-2008), the World Bank clearly defines its stance on gender concerns:

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in more detail later.

20   Gender is a cross-cutting issue in PRSP processes. One of the requirements within this process is that poverty reduction be seen through a gender lens. See Michael Bamberger, et al., "Gender" in *A Sourcebook for Poverty Reduction Strategies*, ed. Jeni Klugman, (World Bank, 2002): 335-586 http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTPOVERTY/EXTPRS/0,,contentMDK:20177449~pagePK:148956~piPK:216618~theSitePK:384201,00.html (accessed 23 October 2007).

21   Ann Whitehead, "Failing Women, Sustaining Poverty: Gender in Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers," Report for the UK Gender and Development Network (GAD/Christian Aid, 2003): 4.

22   Staudt, "Bringing politics back in."

23   Fodor, "Gender Mainstreaming," 13.

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24   Deniz Kandiyoti, pers. comm.

25   For a more detailed examination of state-building processes in general and their effect in Afghanistan, see Ashraf Ghani and Clare Lockhart, *Fixing Failed States: A Framework for Rebuilding a Fractured World* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

The Bank's strategy is to lend support to the government's policy of gender mainstreaming, continuing to pursue the least confrontational lines and build opportunities into the Bank's portfolio where tangible gains can be made. This will involve strengthening women's involvement in the sectors where they already have an acceptable presence including health, education and the civil service...[26]

This statement demonstrates a distinctly guarded approach, with emphasis on assisting with gender mainstreaming only where its presence might not disrupt existing institutional structures. Further, it takes the integrational stance to a different level entirely by being actively cautious, with an underlying assumption of prevailing political winds[27] that might oppose external efforts to instigate social change.

An integrative approach is possibly the easiest way to achieve tangible gains in gender equity without challenging sociopolitical norms. The approach may well be a strategic and sensible means to push (gently) for gender-sensitive change in Afghanistan. Furthermore, for the World Bank — whose mandate is technical and economic, as opposed to political[28] — this distance from the transformative and highly politicised gender mainstreaming agenda as presented in feminist literature is unsurprising and perhaps entirely appropriate. Nevertheless, the extent to which gender equality (as a truly transformative goal) might be promoted through this diluted form of mainstreaming remains to be seen.

In addition to being incremental, IFI approaches to gender equity targets are often justified in terms

of efficiency. In the World Bank's *Interim Strategy Note for Afghanistan*, for example, very little is stated about its commitment to gender equality in general, but it emphasises a focus on women's roles as producers in both the rural and urban economies.[29] Recently ratified by major IFIs such as the IMF and World Bank is the ANDS, which claims that gender inequality needs to be addressed for the benefit of the country as a whole in achieving development targets:

Establishing gender equality is essential so that the country is able to make use of a major human resource that is not [sic] significantly under-utilised — Afghan women.[30]

In all of these examples, efficiency arguments are used to justify a focus on gender equality. Such arguments include the contention that women's potential contribution to society and Afghanistan's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) justify a continued commitment to gender issues; this diminishes the concern that these issues in and of themselves are worthy of support. This efficiency approach stems from the latter period of the Women in Development (WID) era (1980s), and contemporary feminist scholars have dismissed it as inadequate because it does not appear to value gender equality as a satisfactory end in itself. While highly valuable in their contribution to the women and development discourse at the time, this argument is now seen as somewhat detrimental to a rights-based approach and concerns for gender equality on its own merit. Indeed, Shahrashoub Razavi and Carol Miller conclude that combining arguments for gender justice and economic efficiency has been effective as a political strategy, but has encouraged the sidelining of women's demands in development policy.[31] To some extent, efficiency approaches reflect the characteristics and constraints of an

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26   World Bank, *Interim Strategy Note for Islamic Republic of Afghanistan for the period FY07 – FY08*. (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2006), 38. Emphasis added.

27   Staudt, "Bringing politics back in," 179.

28   IBRD Articles of Agreement, Article IV, Section 10, http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/EXTABOUTUS/0,,contentMDK:20049603~pagePK:43912~piPK:36602,00.html#I11 (accessed 23 October 2007). While the Bank is prohibited from becoming involved with a country's political affairs, it can be said that any decision made in choosing what and what not to finance is itself a political statement.

29   World Bank, *Interim Strategy Note,* 38. This is also reflected throughout the ANDS.

30   ANDS, 153. The word "not" should be replaced with the word "now."

31   Shahrashoub Razavi, and Carol Miller, "From WID to GAD: Conceptual Shifts in the Women and Development Discourse," Occasional Paper 1 (Geneva : UNRISD, 41).

integrational form of gender mainstreaming. These approaches often prove strategic in terms of sustaining technical and financial support for gender equality initiatives even when political winds would work against them. They, however, do not provide the transformative commitment to gender equality as a goal in its own right.

This approach is not limited to IFI approaches to gender equality. In interviews with both male and female ministry staff, it was indeed a predominant means of explaining and rationalising a focus on gender issues or Women in Development initiatives. One respondent in MRRD explained why efficiency approaches were necessary in his opinion:

> *...there is a lack of understanding at the highest level, they do not understand why gender mainstreaming is important. We need to link it to something else. We need to have gender equity, for example, but not just for the sake of gender equity — instead, for the sake of development and progress...NGOs talk about women's empowerment, but they have to talk about why this is important, for what it would be useful, and how it is possible to sustain this. Then people will be able to see why this really matters to them.[32]*

The success and applicability of this approach as a political strategy in Afghanistan should not be dismissed. As the above quotation demonstrates, an integrational efficiency stance, in the short term at least, may convince policymakers that gender equity is essential and worthy of investment. In Afghanistan, where there is fierce competition for core budget allocations and where it could be argued that (as elsewhere) gender equality in and of itself is not a high priority on national or international agendas, these arguments may be key justifications in the fight for funding and recognition. In the long term, however, efficiency approaches become inadequate, as the individual human and citizenship rights of women are not considered of high enough importance to merit national action and the transformative connotations of equality are lost. If sustained change in structural inequalities is

to take place, a shift toward empowerment,[33] as opposed to efficiency, is needed.

Origins of gender mainstreaming in Afghanistan

This paper contends that IFIs and other major international donors — for strategic or political reasons — are not at present providing the financial and technical support needed for gender mainstreaming initiatives to produce transformative results. It must be asked, then, where the strategy originated for enhancing gender equality in Afghanistan. In a post-Taliban context, where a focus on women-only mechanisms (such as MOWA) already exists, and in which various national and international actors are committed to restoring women's roles in the public sector,[34] why was gender mainstreaming added to the mix?

As part of the state-building process in Afghanistan, gender mainstreaming does not seem to have been strategically selected as a singular mechanism to promote gender equality on the merit of its strengths or as a result of substantive contextual analysis. While there is indeed the potential for mainstreaming to produce results in Afghanistan, it has thus far been one of many strategies put forward to promote gender equality in a somewhat confusing combination. A range of mechanisms has been used, including a national machinery for women (headed by MOWA), a National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan, and various gender units set up in ministries' targets for gender mainstreaming in the ANDS — each of which is supported by different donors and international agencies. This often uncoordinated support from different donors with varying agendas contributes

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32 Male respondent, MRRD.

33 The term "empowerment" is ambiguous and has been (over-)used in development discourses to the point that the meaning has been considerably diluted. For further discussion on this subject, please see Andrea Cornwall and Karen Brock, "Beyond Buzzwords: 'Poverty Reduction,' 'Participation' and 'Empowerment' in Development Policy" (Geneva: UNRISD, 2005). Here, however, it is used in the above statement to suggest that a focus on women's needs as equal citizens in society should be employed, with a recognition that they have been structurally marginalised in previous regimes in Afghanistan.

34 Female international respondents, female national respondents, MOWA.

to the overlap and institutional confusion that currently hinders processes of mainstreaming.

Of course, it could be argued that all of these mechanisms could be used together to further the cause of gender mainstreaming, but there does not appear to have been a strategy in determining how they might coordinate to do this. MOWA was originally intended to take full responsibility for gender mainstreaming.[35] The co-existence, though, of both a Ministry of Women's Affairs, to which women's issues are often relegated, and a policy for implementing gender mainstreaming across all sectors, for example, seems somewhat incongruous. It appears as though the attitude taken — at least at the initial stages — was one of having "as many gender mechanisms as we can get." This approach has continued since the Bonn process. According to one observer,

> Gender mainstreaming is de rigour among the international community, and so Afghanistan got the current thinking...whether it made sense or not. Because more detailed consideration was just not there.[36]

On one hand, the concept of gender mainstreaming presupposes the prior existence of technical systems through which gender can indeed be mainstreamed. It relies on and works through already operational apparatuses of government.[37] In the context of Afghanistan, where these apparatuses are only just beginning to function operationally after a significant, conflict-ridden hiatus, the choice of gender mainstreaming as a mechanism seems inappropriate.

On the other hand, however, pre-existing institutions are rarely level playing fields, and bring with them ingrained cultures which can often include entrenched gender hierarchies. From this perspective, implementing gender mainstreaming in a context without such existing institutions

might be more successful. This paper explores the lack of functioning technical apparatuses of government[38] and determines that this lack does not equate to there being an absence of ingrained institutional cultures. In Afghan ministries, for example, ex-Soviet methods of operation (such as a tendency toward highly bureaucratic procedures) often remain. This is partly because many view the period of Soviet occupation as one of a flourishing civil service in Kabul, and, more importantly, officials and employees are both familiar with the administrative model used during this time.[39] Merely because the technical systems are newly in place it should not be assumed they are a clean slate, void of institutional norms and practices. It is in this context that gender mainstreaming — which must navigate institutions and their ingrained cultures — is situated.

If operationally functioning government bodies are required to implement mainstreaming initiatives, it must be asked what, in the absence of substantive structures of government, are the necessary institutional mechanisms for the implementation of gender mainstreaming. In this absence, the UN system (UNIFEM and UNAMA, in particular) has become a substitute implementing body, rendering the process (and in this, consistent with the state-building project in general in Afghanistan) entirely donor-led in this sense.[40]

The GoA and international agencies alike could potentially push gender equality using the tool of gender mainstreaming, but the question of how and through what mechanisms remains. While political victories are sought in order to establish gender mainstreaming within the state-building agenda,

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35   Female international observer, pers. comm.

36   International observer, pers. comm.

37   Deniz Kandiyoti, pers. comm.

38   It is acknowledged that ministries existed at the point that gender mainstreaming was first introduced to Afghanistan, but the argument made here is that they were not fully functioning at this point in time, and not in the same way as they had been at other times in recent history.

39   With thanks to an anonymous reviewer for contributing to this point.

40   Anonymous reviewer. The fact that UNIFEM has a separate office for Afghanistan, which is one of the biggest of all recipient countries, should not be downplayed given the relatively small size of Afghanistan compared to other nations in which the organisation works.

little collaborative consideration appears to have been given to the technical and strategic measures needed to ensure significant further achievement in this field.[41]

A closer look at the I-ANDS process and ANDS final document[42]

At the time of writing, Afghanistan's PRSP document, the ANDS, has been submitted, and confirmation that the country will indeed be granted HIPC status, and thus receive interim concessional loans, has been given.[43] Criticisms of the PRSP process in general have been numerous. They include the observations that many countries' PRSP documents are remarkably similar, and that IFI influence into their content is significant.[44]

Despite questions regarding the commitment of the IFIs to promoting gender equality in Afghanistan, it is nonetheless important to acknowledge the significant extent to which gender issues have featured (albeit in non-transformative ways) in the I-ANDS process and indeed in the ANDS final document.

One of the requirements of the PRSP process is that the country structures policy in order to achieve — as far as possible — the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The third MDG concerns promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women.[45] In order to meet this particular MDG, gender equity[46] was incorporated into the I-ANDS as a cross-cutting theme, along with counter narcotics, regional cooperation, anti-corruption, the environment and, as added in the final ANDS document, capacity building (Figure 1).

The cross-cutting themes of the I-ANDS were intended to infiltrate all sectors, and promote coordination and accountability between these sectors.[47] This structure is conducive to gender mainstreaming, as noted in the I-ANDS document:

> By their very nature, these programmes cut across different ministerial and stakeholder mandates…Mainstreaming these themes is a "mandatory" and not a "voluntary" requirement. To this end, indicators have been developed for each of the cross-cutting issues.[48]

Mechanisms were put in place in the I-ANDS process to promote the mainstreaming of gender equity through the various sectors, such as a Cross-Cutting Consultative Group (CCCG) on gender which advises Consultative Groups on gender mainstreaming, the CG2 Working Group on Gender, which is designed to facilitate the implementation of high-level benchmarks on gender, and the CG7 Sub-Working Group on Vulnerable Women. All of these were headed by MOWA. Moreover, a gender equity cross-cutting strategy (related closely to the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan, discussed later in this section) was added to other sector strategies. A set of gender mainstreaming

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41   With thanks to Paula Kantor for her input to this point.

42   Throughout this paper the term I-ANDS is used to describe the process which has been underway over the last two years to produce an Interim National Development Strategy document. This document was then submitted for review and revised before becoming the full ANDS.

43   See "IMF and World Bank Support Afghanistan's Decision Point Under the Enhanced HIPC Initiative," http://www.imf.org/external/np/sec/pr/2007/pr07155.htm, 9 July 2007 (accessed 2 August 2008).

44   Whitehead, "Failing Women, Sustaining Poverty," 11 and 5. Indeed, the extent to which the IFIs themselves determine the content of PRSPs in general has been noted as significant (Whitehead, "Failing Women, Sustaining Poverty," 5). It is furthermore interesting to note that on the one hand, in the initial stages of the I-ANDS, the process was not acknowledged by IFIs to be one and the same as an I-PRSP. The reasons for this are not entirely clear, but a shift has since occurred and the ANDS is now published on the IMF website as Afghanistan's PRSP document http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/cat/longres.cfm?sk=21949.0. On the other hand, the ANDS Secretariat has been insistent that Afghanistan's ANDS constitutes more than just a PRSP document (with thanks to a reviewer for their input to this point).

45   Information taken from http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/ (accessed 23 October 2007). These goals are further reiterated in the Afghanistan Compact, agreed upon in London in January 2006.

46   It is notable that the third MDG refers to gender *equality,* and yet the cross-cutting issue for I-ANDS is on gender *equity* (see glossary for an explanation of the difference between these terms). The two terms tend to be used interchangeably in both the I-ANDS and ANDS documents.

47   I-ANDS, Volume 1, 90.

48   I-ANDS, Volume 1, 90.

Figure 1: Afghanistan National Development Strategy Programmatic Framework

	Security	Governance	Social and Economic Development

Pillar 1	Pillar 2	Pillar 3	Pillar 4	Pillar 5	Pillar 6	Pillar 7	Pillar 8
Security	Good Governance	Infrastructure & Natural Resources	Education & Culture	Health & Nutrition	Agriculture & Rural Development	Social Protection	Economic Governance & Private Sector Devmt

Sectors

Security	Justice	Energy	Education	Health & Nutrition	Agriculture & Rural Development	Social Protection	Private Sector Development & Trade
	Governance, Public Administrative Reform & Human Rights	Transportation	Culture, Media & Youth			Refugees, Returnees & Internally Displaced Persons	
	Religious Affairs	Water Resources Management					
		Information & Communications Technology					
		Urban Development					
		Mining					

Cross-Cutting Issues

- Capacity Building
- Gender Equity
- Counter Narcotics
- Regional Cooperation
- Anti-Corruption
- Environment

Source: ANDS, Executive Summary, 5.

guidelines for other sector strategies was drawn up, aimed at encouraging comprehensive gender analysis (Box 2).

In spite of these measures, during the I-ANDS process a concern was voiced regarding the tendency for cross-cutting issues to be sidelined rather than given the same emphasis as the sectors themselves. This was raised by various respondents from international organisations, one of whom considered the attention to gender in the I-ANDS insubstantial:

> [T]he I-ANDS document itself [was] gender blind. When we talk about gender they say it is a cross-cutting issue but this only means that it is not given as much weight as a whole sector... They had the idea that gender would...affect all other areas but they didn't know how they were going to operate this — they didn't know how MOWA would support the other ministries or who was going to make sure that gender was mainstreamed — there was no system in place.[49]

Examining this criticism in the light of the final document that has since been released, it is possible to see that it is still relevant. On the one hand, the end of each section contains a table of how each of the six cross-cutting issues will be incorporated into each of the three overarching pillars (Security; Governance, Rule of Law and Human Rights; and Economic and Social Development).[50] Gender issues are, then, mainstreamed across various sectors. On the other hand, the ways in which they are mainstreamed are questionable. For example, gender equity concerns in Pillar Two (Governance, Rule of Law and Human Rights) primarily involve affirmative action measures, but these merely increase quantities of women in public roles. There is no mention of how women will be substantively incorporated into the public sphere, only a vague intention to put them there.[51] Further, gender

equity concerns in Pillar Three include key examples of how those determining the content of the ANDS are reluctant to pursue a transformative agenda. The gender indicators under Information, Communication and Technology (ICT) state that:

> Mobile and electronic commerce will make it possible for women to work at home and be commercially viable without offending cultural sensitivities.[52]

This not only contradicts commitments adopted elsewhere in the ANDS to increase women's participation in the public sphere, but it also clearly demonstrates an unwillingness to challenge the status quo. Furthermore, certain assumptions are made, one of which presumes women's current ability to use "mobile and electronic commerce" to their economic advantage. It also clearly implies that women's work outside the home will likely offend "cultural sensitivities," although what these might be remains unclear.

With the exception of the sector on health,[53] those compiling the ANDS appear to have had difficulty trying to determine ways in which the development measures proposed in the three main pillars will affect the promotion of gender equality. As such, while it can be said that gender has been "mainstreamed" across the ANDS, it has not been mainstreamed substantively. Attempts to incorporate gender perspectives across all sectors could even be said to have caused a diluting of gender benchmarks: in some sectors, authors appear to have struggled to find ways in which gender relates to a particular subject (for example ICT, as detailed above). This demonstrates the current inefficacy of gender mainstreaming attempts in the ANDS, and emphasises the complex and challenging nature of mainstreaming gender substantively through national policy. This more directly results from the flaws of the ANDS process as a whole, rather than from gender mainstreaming as a strategy in itself, but gives a concrete example of the ways in which

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49   Female representative of international agency.

50   ANDS, 60, 70 and 136.

51   ANDS, 70.

52   ANDS, 136.

53   The gender considerations in the section on health in the ANDS are considerably more substantive than other sectors: ANDS, 140.

> **Box 2: Means of mainstreaming gender equity within the I-ANDS process**
>
> *Gender equity: I-ANDS cross-cutting theme*
>
> - CCCG on Gender, meets monthly to advise Consultative Groups on gender mainstreaming
>
> - Gender mainstreaming guidelines produced to assist sectors in producing gender-sensitive strategies
>
> - CG2 Working Group on Gender
>
> - Technical Advisory Group for Women and Children (Sub-working group within Legal Reform working group)
>
> - Sub-working group on Vulnerable Women (under Social Protection Pillar), CG7.
>
> - Gender Equity Cross-Cutting Strategy: chapter in the I-ANDS to promote gender mainstreaming in sector strategies
>
> - Series of strategies outlined to enable GOA to reach MDG targets. These include establishing gender units in each ministry, strengthening MOWA's capacity to encourage gender mainstreaming in other ministries, and improve the collection of sex-disaggregated data.
>
> *ANDS gender benchmarks*
>
> - Five-year strategic benchmark: by end-2010: NAPWA will be fully implemented, and according to Afghanistan's MDGs, female participation in governance will be strengthened (I-ANDS, Volume 1, 91)
>
> - Seven other gender benchmarks in various sectors including Governance; Rule of Law and Human Rights; Education; Health; and Social Protection.
>
> *MOWA-ANDS Secretariat*
>
> - Meets to coordinate efforts between ANDS and MOWA in promoting gender mainstreaming, and highlights any difficulties being faced by either party. Functions primarily as a problem-shooting mechanism.

gender mainstreaming in practice has become far removed from feminist theories of development.[54] This paper contends that gender mainstreaming in this diluted form does not substantively enhance the promotion of gender equality and that, as such,

corrective measures must be taken.

A short summary of each of the strategies for the six cross-cutting themes follows the sections dedicated to these pillars. The section on gender equity demonstrates a divergence from the rest of the document: it expansively demands

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54   Staudt, "Bringing politics back in," 177-190.

transformative social change in gender relations.[55] In this regard it reflects the more detailed content of the draft gender sector strategy and the NAPWA. This expansiveness, however, while highlighting the broad and various gender needs and interests of women in Afghanistan, serves to cloud the issue and detract from any targeted implementable strategy that might otherwise be put in place. One example of the requirements in the "Implementation Framework" of this section of the ANDS reads:

An advocacy and public communication strategy that will transform negative perceptions and attitudes towards women will be implemented nationwide, with particular attention to women, men, religious leaders, media and institutions and influential decision-makers in society.[56]

Although these ambitious demands would in themselves be transformative, little substantiates them and solid commitments to their implementation are notably lacking. It is not specified how perceptions and attitudes toward women are expected to change, nor is the timeframe given in which this is expected to happen. Furthermore, "negative perceptions and attitudes" are not explained — it is not stated what these are defined as or the potential problems their continued existence might cause.

These criticisms are not limited to the text of the body of the ANDS but also can be extended to the more detailed draft Cross Cutting Gender Sector Strategy.[57] The very existence of such a strategy in the ANDS process is an undeniably positive factor. However, the "benchmarks" given within this initial document are difficult both to decipher and to implement. One of the core priorities outlined in the document is the mainstreaming of gender in key

sectors.[58] The benchmarks given for the first two of these sectors — "Macro-Economic Framework" and "Private Sector Development" — read as follows:

Benchmark: Increased investment in social services such as education, health, clean drinking water, and other commitments in the Afghanistan MDGs in accordance with international benchmarks.[59]

Benchmark: Adoption and implementation of measures that improve women's participation, leadership and access to business and economic opportunities.[60]

These are vacuous notions, and they do not provide specific targets for sectors or ministries. This ambiguity, though, is characteristic of many of the draft sector strategies and is certainly not limited to gender. There are also examples of more concrete guidelines within the draft Cross Cutting Strategy for Gender Equity.

Clear and strategic benchmarks, even if commonplace, would not function as magic bullets to improve the implementation of gender mainstreaming overnight. They would, however, provide a step in the right direction. They would also signify a directed commitment of national policymakers and the international community to the gender agenda. At present, the vagueness of benchmarks communicates a lack of attention to detail and a distinctly hollow approach to the subject. It also suggests that there is, at some point in the policymaking process, a lack of capacity in the channelling of broader visions for gender equality into strategic, implementable benchmarks. If there are few clear strategies to follow or measurable benchmarks to work toward, there is little hope of gender mainstreaming being taken seriously as a policy for substantive implementation.

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55   ANDS, 149.

56   ANDS, 149.

57   Ministry-specific and sector strategies for the final ANDS will be compiled in its second volume, which has not been released at the time of writing. As such an analysis of the draft documents is given here.

58   The four key sectors identified for gender mainstreaming are: Macro-Economic Framework, Private Sector Development, Culture and Media, and Information Technology. Why these particular sectors were chosen, as opposed to others, is not specified.

59   I-ANDS, *Draft Gender Equity Cross-Cutting Strategy 2008-2013*, (revised version), 8.

60   I-ANDS, *Draft Gender Equity Cross-Cutting Strategy.*

Finally, mirroring PRSPs in the countries studied by Whitehead,[61] there is no acknowledgement in the ANDS that the economy is gendered[62] (although women's contribution to the household economy is noted in the Poverty Profile[63]). Furthermore, gender issues are not prioritised in ANDS budgeting processes.[64] While gender equity is incorporated in the ANDS as a cross-cutting issue, this makes it remarkably easy to exclude from sectoral budgets. It can be assumed that funding for cross-cutting agendas will come from elsewhere.

The National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA)

NAPWA was formed as a result of Afghanistan's participation in the Beijing +10 UN Women's Conference in New York, in 2005, to which a national delegation was sent. Led by then Minister for Women's Affairs, Dr. Masooda Jalal, the delegation subsequently pushed for a National Action Plan for Women in Afghanistan, having interacted with those implementing similar national policies in other countries.[65] As such, NAPWA represents a prime example of the transferring of policy through international conferences, the UN and the global feminist movement in general.

According to the ANDS, NAPWA forms one of the key mechanisms through which gender will be mainstreamed at the national level. As such, it is a considerable achievement on the part of the national and international actors involved that such a major governmental commitment to women and gender equity has been incorporated into national policy. As a policy document, NAPWA has become a political victory, and it is hoped that as a part of the ANDS, it will prove a significant bargaining tool for those attempting to hold the government accountable regarding its commitment to women.[66] At the time of writing, it has not yet been ratified by the President, but it was approved by the Second Vice President in May 2008 and is currently in the process of being sent to the Cabinet.[67]

Since NAPWA was first conceptualised, it has been through various stages of development. The process of policy formation has been largely undertaken by MOWA, with the support of UNIFEM. From the beginning national ownership has been encouraged. This is not to say, however, that international intervention has not been significant, and UNIFEM has provided a key driving force behind national consultations on NAPWA, meetings in ministries and other participatory practices. Indeed, it appears that other members of the international community (and particularly international technical advisors in MOWA) have been largely excluded from the drafting of the document. On the one hand, this has protected it from the potentially conflicting agendas of powerful agencies, but on the other, many internationals have become highly critical of the process, which to them appears a project of UNIFEM alone.[68] Such "turf wars" do not appear to have affected the amount of support available for the implementation of NAPWA: as other internationals, while critical, accept the necessity of such a document and tout its inclusion as a benchmark in the ANDS as an achievement. They have however offered considerable critique: essentially, that the implementation of NAPWA is unrealistic in its timeframes and that it is more of a wish-list than a strategy. As one international respondent commented,

> *[NAPWA] is an ideal document, and it doesn't take the realities into consideration. It's a shopping*

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61   Whitehead, "Failing Women, Sustaining Poverty."

62   The assertion here that the Afghan economy is "gendered" refers to the way in which (in many sectors) it does not take into account the differing needs, norms and values of men and women.

63   ANDS, 31

64   International observer, pers. comm.

65   This is not to say, however, that there was initially a broad-based ownership among Afghans of NAPWA – indeed, it is often seen as having been a political tool for a few influential individuals and agencies. (With thanks to an anonymous reviewer for contributing to this point).

66   Female international respondent.

67   International observer, pers. comm.

68   Three international respondents independently expressed such criticism in interviews.

list, it's massive. Although they identified six priority sectors, there is no prioritization. The document was produced by internationals and even within the international community it was not a very consultative process.[69]

These criticisms should be addressed constructively in the revisions to NAPWA which will be undertaken after one year of its being ratified. For NAPWA to become more than a political victory, and a means through which gender equality can be promoted, concrete strategies must be developed from its current list of expected outcomes.

MOWA and Afghanistan's national machinery for women

The Bonn Process, in which the project of post-Taliban state-building in Afghanistan was initially formed, required that a Ministry for Women's Affairs (MOWA) be established as part of the executive body in the country's Interim Administration. As such, the role of the international community and the global women's movement in promoting the representation of women at the level of national policymaking cannot be discounted. However, precursors of MOWA had existed in a variety of different forms in Afghanistan — such as the Women's Grand Organisation, the Women's General Council and the Women's Central Club[70] — since 1943. A number of vocal Afghan women were present in Bonn at the time of the formation of the Agreement, backed by Afghan women's organisations in Pakistan, strongly supported the prospect of a Ministry for Women.[71] In its current state, MOWA forms the central component of Afghanistan's national machinery for women.

The benefits and shortcomings of this kind of national machinery — an entire ministry devoted to women's affairs — have been widely debated.[72] The general consensus is that national machinery at the highest level possible in any given country is potentially the most effective. One of the arguments in favour of a ministry-level body, instead of a lower level committee or autonomous organisation, is that its considerable status can be used to its advantage. As Shirin Rai writes, "Location at the highest level raises the profile of the machinery and arguably enhances its economic and political resources."[73]

In Afghanistan however the status of MOWA as a ministry has been significantly contested, most notably in Parliament where its continued existence has been debated on several occasions. Part of the problem is the issue of what MOWA is designed to do. From its inception it was designated a policymaker ministry, mandated to assist other ministries to mainstream gender issues, and as such was freed of the responsibility of programme implementation or service provision. However, without this service provision, it is seen as an inactive and incapable ministry which is not achieving any tangible gains in improving women's situation in the country.[74] The ministry is often unfairly judged according to standards of implementation, a factor which contributes toward its reputation for being ineffective.[75] Perhaps due to its controversial status and relatively high profile among Afghans, the work of MOWA is judged more critically than, say, the Ministry of Counter Narcotics (MCN) which is also a policymaking ministry. The general public may also show systematic bias against MOWA, as one international respondent noted:

[People] criticise everything that women do... [Their] perceptions of MOWA have not changed

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69   Female international respondent.

70   Information taken from "The History of MOWA," http://www.mowa.gov.af/content/about_mowa/history_of_mowa_eng.html , (accessed 10 October 2007).

71   International observer, pers. comm.

72   See Goetz, "Mainstreaming Gender Equity."

73   Shirin Rai, "Institutional methods for the advancement of women: mainstreaming gender, democratizing the state?" in *Mainstreaming gender, democratizing the state? Institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women,* ed. Shirin Rai, (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), 28.

74   This statement is based on general perceptions of MOWA as given in interviews with women and men across the six case study ministries.

75   Female international respondent.

over the last five years, in spite of the fact that the ministry has developed.[76]

This however is not easy to prove, and, as might be expected, ministries which can offer tangible service provision (such as the MRRD) are often perceived most favourably.[77]

Another challenge is MOWA's heavy reliance on the international technical advisors working within the ministry. These advisors play a significant role in the functioning of all ministries (see Section 3.5) but the extent of their responsibilities in MOWA is comparably high. As such, there is a trade-off for internationals working within MOWA between meeting governmental requirements (such as the incredibly ambitious I-ANDS deadlines over the last two years) and keeping the ministry afloat in the short-term; or capacity-building staff for long-term development but risking the further sidelining of the ministry.

This considered, MOWA's own potential capacity for promoting gender mainstreaming in the other ministries — one of its central mandates[78] — has been limited to date. Various reasons offered for this limitation include the argument that many of MOWA's staff members lack the political connections and networks to be able to promote mainstreaming effectively in other ministries.[79] Recently however, MOWA has seen the establishment of a new office — one which, although not yet included in the official *tashkil*, could provide a means to significantly improve gender mainstreaming efforts across the ministries. The National Gender Machinery Secretariat (NGMS) was created in August 2007 as the initiative of an Interministerial Working

Group on Gender and GTZ-GM, and is intended to provide an information bank on governmental gender policy. At the moment however, according to its staff, it also serves to coordinate the work of various gender units, women's *shuras*, Female Staff Representatives (FSRs) and other such ministerial mechanisms across all ministries. It currently co-exists with the already-established Gender Training and Advocacy Department in MOWA, and is, to some extent, working together with this department.[80] The NGMS will be discussed in more detail in Section 3.

3.3 Gender mainstreaming in the context of Afghan ministries[81]

Having explored the concept of gender main-streaming both as a global movement and as a strategy put forward as part of the state-building agenda in Afghanistan, it is now appropriate to look more closely at the context of Afghan ministries. When considering the viability and potential longevity of gender mainstreaming, it is crucial to first consider the ways the concept of gender itself is perceived by ministry staff. A variety of potential problems concerning the term "gender" were identified by respondents, not least that it is considered a foreign term without adequate translation in Dari or Pashto, that it is a "sensitive issue" for people and that the capacity of staff promoting gender issues in ministries is distinctly lacking. Contrary to prior expectations of the research team, though, respondents often related gender issues to the work of their own ministry, which demonstrated a degree of ownership of these issues. Other expected distinctions in the perspectives of different staff groups (men/women, those working on gender issues/not working on gender issues, phase one/phase two ministries) were also not consistently upheld by the data.

76　Female international respondent.

77　Opinions of other ministries as gathered from male and female respondents across the six case study ministries.

78　I-ANDS, Volume 1, 91.

79　With thanks to an anonymous reviewer for contributing this point.

80　NGMS representative, pers. comm.

81　The author is grateful for the invaluable assistance of Saghar Wafa and Ali Hassan Fahimi in compiling the majority of this section.

Defining gender: perceptions in ministries

Over the course of the two phases of this research, a variety of different definitions of "gender" were given by respondents (Table 2), but due to the lack of adequate translation of the term, none are able to fully capture the meaning that has been ascribed to it in the gender and development discourse.[82] The word *jensiyat* was most commonly used to mean gender, but it usually translates more accurately as "sex"; having said this, the word *jens*, from which *jensiyat* is derived, is often used also to mean category. The closest attempt at translation is probably *jensiyat-e ejtamahi*, or "social identification," but these terms are not commonly used together and form a clumsy phrase with which few people are familiar. It is due to this difficulty in translation that many respondents used English terminology when talking about gender issues.[83] While there were many characteristics that can be drawn from the definitions of gender as given by ministry staff, two in particular are worthy of note: the use of "gender" to mean "women," and the merging of "gender" with "equal rights."

Firstly, the terms "gender" and "women" were often used interchangeably by respondents during this study. Generally speaking, ministry staff who did not work officially on gender issues or who were not familiar with the term "gender" used the two words synonymously.

Table 2:	Translations of gender		
	Dari	*Transliteration*	*English*
ANDS	جنسیت اجتماعی (جندر)	*Jensiyat-e ejtamahi* (gender)	Social identification (gender)
1 *(MOWA strategy document)*	جنسیت	Jensiyat	sex
2	تساوی جنسیت	Tasawi-e jensiyat	Equality between sexes
3	قدرت دادن به زنان	Qodrat dadan ba zanha	Empowerment of women
4	جنس زن و مرد	Jens-e zan wa mard	Sexes of men and women
5	موقف اجتماعی زنان	Mawqef-e ejtamahi zanan	Social status of women
6	تساوی حقوق	Tasawi-e huquq	Equal rights
7	مساوات بین زن و مرد	Masawat bain-e zan wa mard	Equality between men and women

*Numbers 2-7 refer to definitions of gender as given by respondents from the ministries in interviews.

With thanks to Saghar Wafa for compiling this table. Terms are given in Dari and not Pashtu in Tables 1 and 2 because all of the interviews were conducted in Dari. Respondents were given the choice of Dari, Pashto or English as languages in which to conduct the interviews but all chose either Dari or English.

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82   This is not a problem specific to Afghanistan — "gender" is notoriously difficult to translate from English into other languages. Goetz, "Mainstreaming Gender Equity," 53.

83   It is for this reason that AREU also uses the English word "gender" in translations of reports on the subject.

Other ministry staff who had more experience working on gender issues often complained about how their colleagues, and notably members of the international community, tended to merge the meanings of the words. In general they did not expand on why this was a problem, although one respondent in the MOF voiced this concern:

> Gender is not only about women, it is about equality between men and women. When we have international trainings, always they are talking about women's rights, so does this mean that gender is women?[84]

This blurring of terms by internationals was frequently mentioned by ministry staff in interviews and serves to increase any confusion that already existed in ministries. It also highlights how this slippage between women and gender is still common in many other contexts, in spite of the fact that the term "gender" has been used to inform global development policy on the social relations between men and women for at least the last 30 years.

In Afghanistan, however, there are additional and particular reasons why the distinction between the two terms is blurred, both in ministries and international agencies. There has been a focus, at least verbally, on the rights of Afghan women by the international community. Women have been discriminated against in Afghanistan in many ways, so a commitment to emphasise their rights as a disadvantaged group seems fair. However, focusing on gender issues recognises that women do not exist in an isolated environment and that the relationships and power dynamics between women and men must be acknowledged and understood before substantial change can take place.

The blurring of terms, then, is understandable and is not in itself criticised in this report.[85] What is considered inaccurate, however, is the use of the term "gender" without an analysis of power

structures and social relations that neither the biological concern with physical sex (translated as *jensiyat*) nor the sole focus on women can encapsulate. When "gender" and "women" are used interchangeably, this analysis can be lost. Furthermore, in spite of the preferred usage of the word "gender" in development discourse, the term is far from uncontested and certainly does not provide a perfect description of social dynamics between men and women.[86]

Differences between development theory and practice compound the issue further. As such, it is wholly unsurprising that there is no clear distinction between these two categories made by ministry staff in interviews. The extent of this blurring, however, on both the parts of national and international actors, should be borne in mind when considering the amenability of ministry environments for gender mainstreaming.

Secondly, the term "gender" was used by many respondents to mean the establishing of equality or equal rights between men and women. As one male interviewee from the MOIA described:

> Gender is a new term, but it means equality of the sexes, tasawi-e-jensiyat. Or, making men and women equal, this is gender.[87]

This merging of gender with gender equality was commonplace in interviews in both phases of the research. This expansion of the meaning of gender is less problematic, however, than the fact that respondents only rarely went on to explain what the implementation of gender equality in Afghanistan might mean. Further, the notion of "equal rights for men and women" appears to be a learnt phrase: respondents seemed reluctant to explain further what these "rights" might be. Making use of a discourse of gender equality does not necessarily imply an understanding of its meaning or a motivation to implement gender initiatives. This

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84 Male respondent, MOF.

85 Indeed, it is acknowledged that the terms overlap to some degree in this report, although care has been taken to ensure that "gender" is used to denote its full meaning and not simply to replace the word "women."

86 For further discussion on this see Deniz Kandiyoti, "Gender, Power and Contestation: 'Rethinking bargaining with patriarchy,'" in *Feminist Visions of Development,* ed. C. Jackson and R. Pearson, 145 (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

87 Male respondent, MOIA.

practice of using terms without fully understanding them, or without committing to put them into practice, has been dubbed "fake ownership"[88] and is not particularly conducive to the substantive implementation of gender mainstreaming.

Further, while in Afghanistan, a disparity between the rights of men and women is widely acknowledged, in many interviews, ministry respondents did not explain how the reduction of this disparity might be achieved.[89] Responsibility for improving gender equality indicators was often assigned by respondents to the Ministries of Justice, Education or Hajj and Religious Affairs.[90]

Perceived problems with "gender" as a word or concept

Having looked at two principal characteristics of respondents' own definitions of gender, and the potential problems these might imply, the problems they themselves perceive with the term are now considered. One of the fundamental problems with the term "gender," as reported by ministry staff, was the issue of its being foreign, and as such not indigenous or acceptable to Afghanistan or its people. This perception is emphasised by the current lack of translation of the word in either Dari or Pashto. One respondent talked about how he thought "gender" was not new to Afghanistan, but the terminology used was a significant problem:[91]

Gender in Afghanistan is not new, but the wording

is not clear. We don't have a clear meaning. We have to use the English word "gender"... This word we have inherited from you [referring to the international researcher] and we are not sure how we should conceptualise it in our own understanding.[92]

Many respondents were concerned about the potential resistance of people outside the ministries to the term purely on the basis of its being considered foreign and part of an unknown international agenda in Afghanistan. This was linked, however, to a perceived lack of understanding among Afghans (and especially those in rural areas) of its true meaning, as the following quotation highlights:

People in [rural] areas are illiterate and do not know about gender issues, or what gender is... They think that gender is only giving freedom to women and they are afraid that when their women learn about it they will not obey them anymore. That is why they are sensitive towards gender issues.[93]

Ministry staff emphasised frequently that this lack of understanding caused a problem in rural areas. Significantly, they did not suggest that gender as a concept in its own right was the issue at stake. Interesting also was a prevalent reference to the "illiterate people" in these rural areas, and the assumptions made along an urban-rural dichotomy. Ministry staff frequently presumed that gender issues were understood and accepted in Kabul (and other cities), but that the real problem lay with the incomprehension of gender of those living in non-urban locations. This inherent condescension toward non-urban Afghans is unsurprising, given the historical context: in the past, Kabul was considered an entirely separate entity from the rest of the country, as the home of the elite and the educated. The bodies of government and the civil service with which this report is concerned are generally to be found in Kabul, and not in the rural areas to which respondents referred. However, a significant concern arising from many responses

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88   Rachel Wareham. Communicated to the author by Deniz Kandiyoti, pers. comm.

89   This is reflective of "gender accountability" debates more generally – in many countries actors are aware of gender disparities existing but there appears to be a widespread reluctance to designate responsibility for the addressing of these disparities (with thanks to Meryem Aslan for contributing this point).

90   Respondents mentioned that the Ministry of Hajj and Religious Affairs not only had great influence among rural people (to whom it was assumed gender training needed to be given most urgently) but also the greatest access to these people through local mullahs. It was suggested that as a result of these facts this ministry should take responsibility for rectifying gender inequalities (various respondents).

91   It appears that this respondent refers to "gender" and the issue of women's rights interchangeably, reflecting a more general slippage between the two in interviews.

92   Male respondent, MRRD.

93   Female respondent, MRRD.

about "rural people" were the assumptions made about the levels of acceptance and understanding of gender issues among people in Kabul, purely on the basis of their *living in* Kabul.[94]

Respondents in both phases frequently indicated that gender is a "sensitive" issue, as suggested in the quotation above. It was often considered that rural communities were more "sensitive" to these issues. One female respondent from MOWA explained her own perception of this sensitivity:

> *In our society, "gender" is a term that everyone is sensitive about. Not in Kabul but in the provinces, if you use the term "gender," people immediately think it is a non-Muslim word, and it takes skill to raise people's awareness about this.*[95]

Essentially, when referring to the subject of gender, respondents implied that one should be careful not to upset or anger people. Many ministry staff members expressed concern with "taking things slowly" so they would not provoke negative reactions. One reason why, once again, this sensitivity was explained in relation to rural areas could be the widespread negative association of respondents from these areas with "traditional" practices such as child marriage and forced marriage, and the ill-treatment of women in general. Making the assumption (though without offering specific evidence) that such practices are commonplace in rural areas, ministry staff often reasoned that gender activism promoting the end of these practices would cause a considerable reaction.[96]

Respondents did not, however, clarify why such a reaction might be caused by the introduction of new gender agendas. Simplifying the problem to an issue of "sensitivity," almost all respondents omitted possible reasons for this and in general assigned the cause of the problem to the "backward" nature of rural populations. The simplification of this issue into "sensitivity" by ministry staff, and the lack of expansion on meanings and reasons behind it, demonstrates a certain desire on the part of respondents to be distanced from rural communities and their perceived social practices.

Challenged assumptions

As mentioned in the methodology outlined above, the research team held certain assumptions prior to commencing this study. One assumption was that neither the term "gender" nor the strategy of gender mainstreaming would be owned by ministry staff, who would consider these entirely foreign concepts. To a great extent, as discussed above, this assumption was found to be true. However, respondents also talked about gender issues with reference to the work of their own ministries. For example, respondents in MRRD defined gender in terms of equal access to decision-making processes, as promoted in the NSP programme of that ministry. MOIA staff talked about the importance of women's participation in the police force, related to recent efforts to recruit more women. Respondents in MCN discussed the ways in which the misuse of narcotics has effects on men and women differentially. A focus on the basic participation of women as both ministry staff and programme recipients predominated. The ways in which respondents across all ministries, however, related gender issues to the concerns of their specific ministries were indicative of how these issues are considered relevant to (if not the primary responsibility of) each sector.

Further, on disaggregating the data set, distinctions between staff groups differed from research team expectations. Three particular assumptions previously held by the research team were

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94   However, what was meant by "gender issues" by respondents here is debatable. It was clear from the transcripts that two key issues are encapsulated by "gender" and were not often taken on board: namely, that sex does not determine societal roles and the rejection of gendered hierarchies. For example, respondents would often talk about how people in Kabul (including themselves) accept gender issues, and would then go on to talk about women's natural role as wives and mothers, or about how women did not have the capacity to be in positions of authority (interview, male respondent, MOPH, for example).

95   Female respondent, MOWA.

96   In Nancy Tapper's study of the ban of brideprice under the PDPA regime, it is argued that practices involving women's subordination can be essential to the reproduction of social parameters, the disruption

of which cause considerable social upheaval. Nancy Tapper, *Bartered Brides: Politics, Gender and Marriage in an Afghan Tribal Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

challenged. First, female members of ministry staff were presumed to have greater knowledge of gender issues than male members of staff. Second, staff working on gender issues (in a unit or women's *shura*, for example) would have a wider understanding of these issues also. Third, staff in phase one ministries, in which gender units were established, would be more familiar with gender terminology than those in phase two ministries which do not as yet have gender units.

The data collected called into question these three assumptions. Data revealed that neither sex, job description nor ministry made a substantial difference to the amount respondents knew about gender issues or to their readiness to talk about them. Rather, these were dependent on respondents' prior experience and employment — for example, if they had previously worked for an international agency or if they had been involved in gender trainings. Respondents reported various sources of their information on gender, including the ANDS document, international workshops (at which one respondent had acted as a translator and gathered information in this way), and family members who worked in other ministries on gender issues. For the most part, the information gained from these sources was limited. Respondents often said that they had *heard* about gender issues through one of the above means but that they could not go into detail about what these issues were. It cannot be said that a substantive understanding of gender had been gained from these sources, but nevertheless it is interesting to note the variety of sources mentioned.

When attempting to implement gender mainstreaming initiatives, it is necessary, then, not to make assumptions about the prior knowledge of different staff groups. These could be detrimental to the furthering of this agenda. For example, singling out men as a group on which to focus gender training may be useful to some degree, but it inherently assumes that men are the group potentially most resistant to the promotion of gender equality. Data from the study demonstrates this is not necessarily true. The findings of the study demonstrate that the institutional contexts of Afghan ministries are not static nor can they be subject to generalisation. This observed tendency towards change within ministries offers hope for gender mainstreaming, since it implies ministry staff perceptions may also shift. Whether these perceptions are acted on, however, is another matter (see Section 4.1).

This section has discussed gender mainstreaming as a global movement and has situated the term within current feminist thinking. It has also looked at the ways in which mainstreaming has been established as a mechanism to promote gender equality in Afghanistan. Finally, it has focused on local perceptions of gender within the context of Afghan ministries.

From this section, it can be concluded that gender mainstreaming is an imported strategy tool, brought to Afghanistan as a result of policy transfer of global best practice. While various factors concerning staff attitudes toward gender issues (as have been outlined in this section) may facilitate mainstreaming efforts and a degree of ownership of gender issues can be seen, the strategy as a whole remains essentially foreign and, to date, has been entirely donor-led (in an integrational fashion). There is the potential for the strategy to take hold and for mainstreaming to have meaning in Afghanistan. There is also, though, a need for corrective action, and the reasons why it is not being substantively implemented at present must be explored. One reason discussed later (in Section 4) is the abstractness of mainstreaming and the undetermined nature of its direct recipients and proposed results. As the following section details, two other factors hindering implementation are the ministry structures themselves and the technical apparatuses through which gender mainstreaming is proposed to be implemented.

4. Technical Concerns

This section assesses the different kinds of gender mechanisms found in the case study ministries in both phases of this research. These include gender units, women's *shuras*, working groups, interministerial mechanisms and technical advisors. It looks at their respective technical value in promoting gender mainstreaming. The number and type of existing mechanisms vary from ministry to ministry (Table 3). At the very least, most ministries have a women's *shura*, which acts as a makeshift union for female staff, and is often tasked with addressing "women's problems" but which is not usually included in the ministerial *tashkil*.[97]

4.1 Gender units and women's *shura*s: caught in confusion?

Gender units exist within the formal structure of a ministry. They are usually staffed by two or three people, and are tasked with responsibilities that generally fall into two categories: raising awareness about gender issues among staff *inside* the ministry and gender-sensitizing ministry policy. A gender unit's role can also involve coordinating activities with gender units in other ministries and with international technical advisors.[98] Gender units are products of the post-2001 institutional reforms initiated by international agencies. As such, they are not indigenous to ministries and are very recent additions to ministry structures. Furthermore, gender units as they currently exist are not fully-fledged and functioning institutions, but are for the most part in the initial stages of being formed. As such, their policies, procedures, TORs and aims/objectives are not fixed but still emerging.

Table 3:	Matrix of gender mechanisms in 6 case study ministries					
Ministry	Phase	Gender unit	Working group/ task force	Gender focal point	Gender advisor (national/ international)	Women's *shura*/ association
Public Health (MOPH)	1	X	X	X		
Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD)	1	X		X	X	X
Interior Affairs (MOIA)	1	X			X	X*
Justice (MOJ)	2			X		X
Education (MOE)	2				X	X*
Counter Narcotics (MCN)	2					X

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97   This is with the exception of the women's shuras in the Ministry of Education (which is apparently part of the *tashkil* although a copy was unavailable at the time of conducting the study and so this cannot be verified by the research team) and the MOIA.

98   GTZ-GM (NGMS), "Job descriptions for Female Staff Representatives and Gender Units" (unofficial), (2008), given to AREU with kind permission of the NGMS office in MOWA.

As mentioned in Section 2.3, ministries in the first phase all had gender units included in their *tashkils*, while those in the second phase did not (Table 3).[99] Nevertheless, the two phases will be discussed together as respondents in ministries without gender units in phase two often gave information and opinions about units in other ministries.

Women's *shuras* are usually informal staff associations for women, headed by an elected women's representative. They meet (in some ministries more regularly than others) to discuss "women's problems" in the ministry and are often involved in organizing events for Women's Day (8 March). These mechanisms exist in most ministries; many were established during the Soviet era. This link to the Soviet regime accounts for the predominantly welfare-oriented approach that is characteristic of these *shuras*. Women's *shuras* do not usually have a position in the *tashkil*,[100] and the pressure they are able to exert on ministry leadership bodies is relatively limited.

These mechanisms have entirely different origins and are intended to achieve completely different outcomes. It has, though, been found in this study that the two often overlap and — where both exist within a ministry — generate a considerable amount of duplication in their work. This section will explore further the relationships between these ostensibly distinct means of promoting gender equality.

Positions in ministry tashkils

Formal positions in ministry tashkils: a necessary measure

According to a number of respondents across ministries, a distinct advantage held by gender units over other kinds of gender mechanisms is their formal position within the ministry *tashkil*. Respondents gave various reasons as to why this position would be beneficial. For example, it was often considered that when holding a formal post in a gender unit, as part of a ministry *tashkil* and

Table 3 continued:		Matrix of gender mechanisms in 6 case study ministries	
Ministry	**Women's representative**	**Other**	**Comment**
Public Health (MOPH)			
Rural Rehabilitation and Development (MRRD)	X		
Interior Affairs (MOIA)	X	Gender mainstreaming executive committee; Also 2 gender team members within human rights unit.	*Women's *shura* or "women's affairs unit" is now part of the MOIA *tashkil*
Justice (MOJ)	X		
Education (MOE)	X		*Women's *shura* is officially part of the MOE *tashkil*
Counter Narcotics (MCN)	X		

99   This was not an intentional methodological choice, but was discovered after ministries had been selected.

100   With the exception of the women's shuras in the MOE and MOIA, as mentioned previously.

with a job description and accompanying salary, staff would be more effective than if gender responsibilities were only an informal extra activity alongside formal work. Respondents also stated that without a formal position, staff working on gender issues would struggle to achieve a sense of authority, would have very little time outside of their formal work to concentrate on gender issues, and would often not be allocated a room in which to conduct their activities. In the Ministry of Justice, one female respondent talked about the need for a gender unit in her ministry, and one which would, in theory, replace the existing (informal) women's *shura*:

> We suggested [to the Deputy Minister] that we should have a gender unit because we wanted the women's association to take a formal place in the ministry. Therefore we wanted MOJ to have a gender unit. Currently the women's association is just like a partner with MOJ but we wanted to include it in the tashkil of the MOJ.... We proposed to have a gender unit because no one was interested in working for the women's association. We wanted a gender unit because it would be formal and some people would work for it independently...We said [to the Deputy Minister] that what is expected from the women's association should be done by the gender unit because the gender unit would be supported by the government budget and they must be able to work better than [the women's association].[101]

Issues of time, as well as funding, are important here — this respondent went on to talk about female staff in the ministry not having time to come to women's *shura* meetings, for example, and not being given the time to do this inside office hours. If women themselves are reluctant to attend such meetings without being paid to do so, then the gender unit mechanism in itself may be detrimental to the women's movement. Having said this, there could be a number of reasons behind this lack of attendance at *shura* meetings — it may be that as a result of cultural norms or family restrictions, women are unable to come to meetings after

office hours. Furthermore, there is the question of whether they should be expected to meet after office hours in the first place. Indeed, it could be seen as a significant achievement if women's *shuras* were given permission to meet during the working day. Essentially, this issue of when to meet is a key concern for women's *shura* members. The establishment of official gender units is generally seen as a step forward in solidifying a legitimate claim to ministry time and resources.

In MCN, as in MOJ, the head of the women's *shura* also had aspirations to turn the women's *shura* into a formal gender unit. Primarily, she anticipated greater perceived support from higher levels and budget allocations that would come with recognition in the ministerial *tashkil*:

> [The women's shura] has not yet been included in the tashkil but I want to have it included in the tashkil and budget. It has been promised by the leadership that it will be included in the tashkil this year but I can't believe this because if they wanted to include it, they would have included it at the beginning of the year when the budget is planned and decided. The minister has promised that he would allocate some of the budget from the development section to work on the structure of the GU.[102]

Formal positions in ministry *tashkils* are evidently linked to legitimacy and identity within ministry structures. Furthermore, this respondent notes that support from the higher level is absent for women's *shuras* that are not formally recognised in the *tashkil*. A lack of physical space in which women's *shuras* can meet compounds the problem. Gender units that have formal recognition from ministry *tashkils* are usually able to operate from a small office within one of the ministry departments. Informal women's *shuras*, on the other hand, are not assigned this space. Many women's *shura* members described in interviews the problem of not having a room to meet in. This was particularly the case in the MCN, as one respondent explained:

> I had some suggestions...one of which was to have

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101   Female respondent, MOJ.

102   Female respondent, MCN.

> **Box 3: Case study: Gender mechanisms and their influence in the MOIA**
>
> Since interviews with MOIA staff were conducted for this study, further developments have been made concerning the vertical positioning of the gender unit, as referred to above. In the 2008 tashkil, a new gender mainstreaming unit was officially included, to be comprised of 41 positions — 11 in the MOIA headquarters in Kabul (including a clerk and driver for the head of the unit), and five in each of the six regions in which MOIA has regional units. While these positions have not yet been filled due to the short time since the ratification of the tashkil, job descriptions and a workplan for the first year have been prepared.
>
> It has already been established that the unit will report directly to the Deputy Minister for Administration. Initially it was hoped that the unit would report instead to the FDM, whose work was generally considered more relevant to that of a gender unit. However, the question of where to locate the unit has been a matter of considerable debate: a position so closely related to the Deputy for Administration (a Lieutenant General) is a positive step forward. It has also been decided in the 2008 tashkil to discontinue the role of FDM, and as such, the unit is probably best-placed for potential vertical influence under the Deputy for Administration. Furthermore, the unit will still maintain contact with other senior-level authorities through the Gender Mainstreaming Executive Committee. This high-level committee (currently made up of the Deputy for Administration, General Director of Training and Education, and General Director of Internal Affairs) exists in part to oversee all work in the ministry on gender mainstreaming. It also ensures that the various mechanisms are able to coordinate effectively without overlap. The committee will replace what was previously termed the "women's affairs steering committee."
>
> For a more detailed case study on an earlier phase of the development of the gender unit in MOIA, please see the AREU Working Paper on Gender Mainstreaming preceding this paper (Wordsworth, 2007).

a separate room… so we can sit and meet and have our meetings and workshops inside. This was not accepted by the men of our ministry… Our women's shura sometimes meets in the yard because we don't have any room.[103]

Clearly, without the demonstrated support of the authorities in MCN, the women's *shura* struggles to maintain an image of credibility. Bringing the women's *shura* into the formal structure of the ministry would demonstrate senior-level encouragement for women staff in the ministry and a high-profile concern for gender issues more broadly. In theory, this would also enable the

shura to access and potentially influence those in positions of authority through the formal structure of the ministry.

The women's *shura* in the MOE has been established as a mechanism for a longer period of time (three to four years) than either that of the MCN (six months) or the MOJ (two years).[104] It provides a useful contrast to the others in that it does hold a position in the ministry *tashkil* (possibly in part due to its relatively large number of female staff). This is somewhat unusual for a women's *shura*, although

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103   Female respondent, MCN.

104   It is not clear exactly how long the women's shuras in MOIA and MRRD (there is no *shura* in MOPH) have been established, but the impression given by respondents was that they had both been in existence for substantially longer than those in phase two ministries.

the new MOIA *tashkil* for 2008 has also included the women's *shura* officially as part of the ministry structure. It is possible to identify a greater sense of authority in the interviews conducted with MOE staff than in those with the members of the other *shuras*:

> I have submitted my annual action plan for the new year to the planning department and the minister's office. To some extent it will be acceptable, and they will send it back to me and they will include our budget in the whole budget of the ministry.[105]

The certainty with which the prospect of imminent funding is described here is in stark contrast to the doubts expressed by the respondent in MCN, as is the familiarity with ministry procedures. This can be attributed to the characteristics of the respondents themselves — how long they have worked in the ministries and how proactive they are — along with the length of time the *shura* has been established. However, the formal position of this mechanism within the MOE is also a significant factor contributing to this added sense of legitimacy within the ministry.

Positions of influence

Of course, legitimacy, while important in gaining influence, does not guarantee it. Over the course of this study, it has been found that a mere position in the ministry *tashkil* is not enough to ensure that the work of a gender mechanism is taken seriously. In phase one, in which all case study ministries had formal gender units, it was found that the exact location of the units' positions within the *tashkil* was of considerable importance to its potential efficacy. A unit's position can determine its reach, scope, and ability to penetrate ministry-wide policy. Indeed, the importance of where gender mechanisms sit within ministerial structures has been recognised in other contexts.[106] A unit's position in a ministry does not in any way guarantee

the effective functioning of the unit, as this is also highly dependent on available human and financial resources, capacity and political will (among other things). Nonetheless, the position is a key initial factor in accessing influential support.

There are two elements of institutional structure that must be considered when looking at the position of gender units within ministries: vertical and horizontal positioning. Vertical positioning concerns where in the hierarchy of the ministry the unit is placed, and how many institutional levels exist between the unit and the highest levels of authority. Horizontal positioning, or operational considerations, concerns the extent to which the remit of the unit allows it to affect the workings of other departments in the ministry. These are both fundamental in determining the reach and scope of a unit.

The positions of the gender units in the three case study ministries that had them in place differ greatly. In the MRRD, the gender unit is now accountable to the Planning Department, and has existed for approximately four years in different locations within the ministry.[107] As a result of recent downsizing policy within the ministry, the unit has been demoted from a department into a section within a department.[108] In the MOPH, the unit was established a year ago, and is positioned in the Reproductive Health Department. In the MOIA, the formation and position of the gender mainstreaming unit had been the subject of significant debate during 2007 and early 2008. It now reports directly to the Deputy Minister for Administration.

The structure of the MOIA is notably hierarchical — perhaps more so than the other five case study ministries, possibly due to its military ethos. The active support of senior officials is key in promoting gender sensitive change in all ministries. This support is particularly important in MOIA, given the top-down and hierarchical manner in which the ministry functions. The approval of senior authorities, such as generals and deputy ministers,

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105   Female respondent, MOE.

106   These include the Philippines, in which it is mandatory that gender units report to the highest ministerial authority (female international respondent).

107   Female respondent, MRRD.

108   Male respondent, MRRD.

Figure 2: Ministry of Public Health Organogram
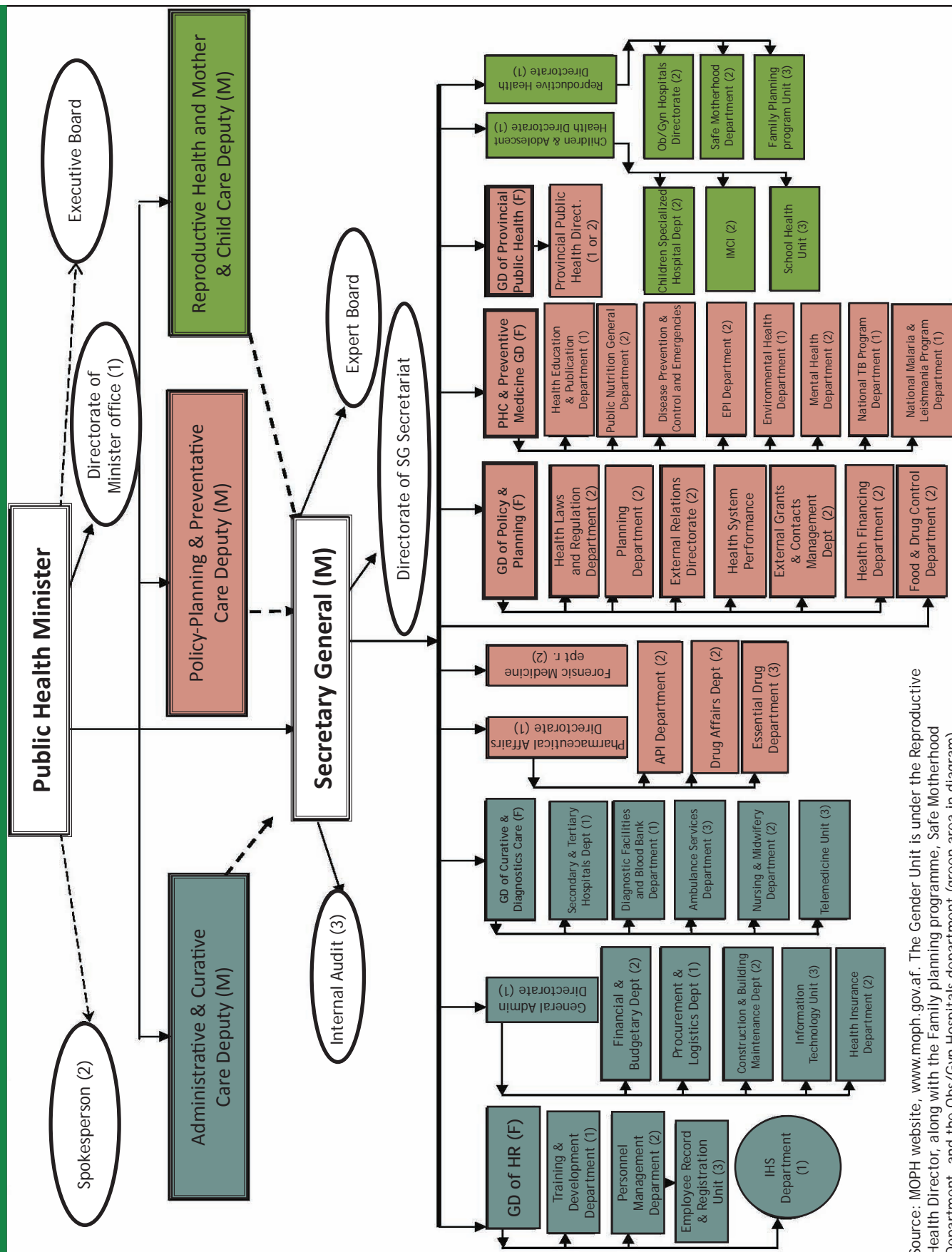
Source: MOPH website, www.moph.gov.af. The Gender Unit is under the Reproductive Health Director, along with the Family planning programme, Safe Motherhood Department, and the Obs/Gyn Hospitals department (green area in diagram).

lends considerable weight to decision-making processes. As the substantive implementation of gender mainstreaming requires significant institutional change, it necessitates the active support of those in high positions. These senior officials must be willing and able to facilitate this change above and beyond any resistance that might be encountered. There is therefore no doubt that the presence of a high-level champion overseeing the activities of the gender unit is necessary to promote gender mainstreaming within the ministry.[109] The importance of the gender unit reporting to the First Deputy Minister (FDM), and of vertical positioning in general, became apparent in one interview in particular. This member of MOIA was considering taking a position in the new gender unit. She explained how the vertical position of the unit would affect her decision:

> It is very challenging for the gender unit to have its activities here. I will accept the position only if it is put under the direct control of the First Deputy Minister. Only if he supports me directly will I take it, as otherwise it could be very challenging.[110]

When later asked to describe the ways in which she thought the position in the gender unit might be "challenging," the respondent primarily referred to resistance from other staff members toward gender issues (see Section 4.1 on institutional cultures). In order to be able to overcome this resistance, she felt she would need the direct support of the FDM.[111] In other words, the closer the vertical position of the unit to the highest authorities, the more influence it is likely to have.

The gender unit in MOPH is an example of a unit whose reach is similarly restricted. It is not closely linked to the top-level authorities and reports to the Director of Reproductive Health, who is then accountable to the Secretary General, who reports to the deputy ministers. Not only does this gender unit have little authority and influence from its vertical position in the *tashkil*, but it is also confined horizontally by its position in the Reproductive Health Department (Figure 2). Two respondents from the ministry explained this in more detail:

> In every ministry they have a human resources department and here they should be providing trainings for everyone. Now our gender unit is in the Reproductive Health Department — why? It should be under the policy department which would then cover everyone, and not only the people in one department would be reached, it would not be limited...I feel like the rest of the ministry is forgotten.[112]

> From my point of view, in our ministry the gender unit is situated in the wrong place. They have linked it with Reproductive Health, but it is supposed to be a cross-cutting issue. It should be in a high level so that it has influence over the whole ministry.[113]

The gender unit in MOPH has relatively little influence on the way other departments in the ministry function. The Reproductive Health Department is already misguidedly associated with women and women's health, and the position of the gender unit within this department serves to reinforce the stereotypes of gender equating to women (Section 2.3) and reproductive health only concerning women. Further, there is no coordination between the Reproductive Health Department and other sectors of the ministry, which effectively cuts the gender unit off operationally from the functions of other departments. This is the case in spite of the fact that it coordinates a working group in which other departmental representatives are members. One result of this horizontal limitation is that the unit appears to focus the majority of its work on external health programmes related to maternal and child health, producing gender "messages" for a campaign on public health practices, for example. This in itself is not a counter-productive activity, but it is not complemented by a focus on

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109   With thanks to T. Murray for her comments on this.

110   Female respondent, MOIA.

111   Female respondent, MOIA.

112   Male respondent, MOPH

113   (Different) male respondent, MOPH

increasing gender awareness within the ministry. While partially fulfilling its mandate, the unit's relatively narrow scope is preventing a broader focus on other programmes.

In sum, there are two key factors regarding positions of gender units and women's *shuras* in the *tashkil* of ministries — how positions in and of themselves are important to their output, but also how their vertical and horizontal locations within ministry structures are also significant in determining their potential efficacy and influence.

One size fits all? *Tashkils* and their variants

It is important to discuss the organisational differences between ministries: not all ministry *tashkils* are the same. This being the case, while it has been argued that an official position in a *tashkil* is important for a gender mechanism, it is not possible to make a one-size-fits-all prescription for the locations of these positions.

The MRRD, for example, is quite unique in that it is comprised of one central ministry and a number of entirely separate entities which exist to coordinate the major national priority programmes. Examples include the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) and the National Area Based Development Programme (NABDP). The gender unit sits within the central body of the ministry itself. Because of a disconnect between the centre and outlying programs, however, it still has very little influence on the ways in which the different programmes function. Various respondents from MRRD commented:

If there is any coordination between programmes, it is in the field, as a result of the work of the Facilitating Partners, and it does not exist in the central office. NSP has no gender policy – the FPs have done this. But the NSP have never hired a gender specialist, because they think they are already very gender balanced… but they have no policy on gender.[114]

When I first started with MRRD in 2005 I went to

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114 Female international respondent, emphasis added.

see the gender unit but they were not interested in working together for women… They have problems within the ministry — we hear about this but they are separate from us.[115]

Programmes are left to organise their own policies on gender, and some are more successful than others in implementing this. NABDP is funded by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), for example, and has hired a gender and community development specialist who has been able to pioneer an integrational, team-building approach to gender awareness. According to the specialist herself, the approach has been well-received.[116] NSP is considered highly gender-sensitive as a result of its emphasis on women's participation in Community Development Councils (CDCs). Indeed, its Operational Manual lays out clear guidelines implementing gender equity in CDCs.[117] These guidelines are addressed to the Facilitating Partners (FPs) of NSP, who are tasked with the responsibility of ensuring that gender equity is considered. This is appropriate, as the FPs implement the programme at the ground level. However, the manual does not outline a mechanism for monitoring whether CDCs meet gender targets, and it lacks corrective measures which could be used in case they do not.[118] Essentially, MRRD programmes are not connected to or coordinated with the central gender unit; staff working for the programmes has little idea of even the basic functions of the unit.[119] This has significant implications on the unit's impact on the programme policies, and limits its scope primarily to the internal activities of the ministry. As such, in spite of its potential horizontal influence on ministry policy due to its position in the Planning

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115 Female respondent, MRRD (NSP programme).

116 Female international respondent.

117 NSP Operational Manual (third version), (15 January 2006) 11.

118 NSP Operational Manual, 11. This, however, is currently being reassessed and it remains to be seen whether new measures for monitoring and evaluation will be put in place.

119 Some effort is being made to remedy this, as UNDP have mandated their NABDP specialist to coordinate with the gender unit. This, however, covers only one programme and its connection with the centre, and is also an external initiative (female international respondent).

Department, without close coordination with gender representatives in the programmes, the reach of the gender unit will remain limited.[120]

Another example of the importance of individual ministry structure is found in the Ministry of Finance. While not a case study ministry, interviews were conducted there in order to understand how it relates to the functions of other ministries. At present, the GTZ-GM-initiated gender budgeting unit (GBU) is situated close to the Deputy Minister's office in the *tashkil*, which is ostensibly positive given the argument for vertically influential positioning. The problem, however, as one respondent explained, is that the unit is reporting to the wrong Deputy:

> *In the tashkil the GBU is under the Deputy for Administration and we are under the Deputy for Finance. It would be better if they were under the same deputy as us…In my opinion they should be here. At the moment the GBU is reporting to a different person, but really it is the Deputy Minister of Finance who has the authority and he is the powerful one, as he decides how money is allocated.[121]*

In spite of the relatively high vertical position held by the GBU, it is not situated in a location conducive to encouraging gender mainstreaming throughout the MOF and line ministries. MOF staff implied that the function of the internal GBU was primarily to raise awareness about gender issues among members of MOF staff. While this is part of its mandate, it is not in a location in which it can fully use its potentially significant influence across other ministries to affect the ways in which they compile their budgets.

As these two examples demonstrate, the individual structure of the ministry in question must be taken into account when considering where to position a gender unit, as what works in one ministry may have little effect in another.

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120   The overall influence of the gender unit is also affected by its weak vertical position in the ministry. Having been recently demoted from a department into a section, its connection with senior authorities has been further weakened.

121   Male respondent, MOF.

Overlapping mandates

Having discussed at length the question of *where* gender units and women's *shuras* are positioned within ministries, the issue of *what* they actually do is worth considering in greater detail. As outlined above, gender units have a dual mandate involving internal and external functions. This ensures that internal staff is familiar with gender issues and that ministry policies are gender sensitive. Women's *shuras* are usually thought to be responsible for issues concerning only female staff in the ministry. A key problem found over the course of this study, however, was that the mandates of these two distinct mechanisms often overlapped. In ministries where only one of the two mechanisms existed, the names used to describe the mechanism were often used interchangeably even by those working within it.[122] Further, respondents demonstrated little comprehension of the distinct differences between the roles of gender units and women *shuras.* This is highlighted in staff members' assumptions that one could be replaced by the other:

> *If we had a gender unit, we might dissolve the women's* shura.[123]

This quotation implies that the two would perform the same, or at least very similar, functions.

This overlap of mandates could prove a problem for gender mechanisms and their potential productivity for a number of reasons. The first is that such a crossover of responsibilities serves to reinforce the idea that "gender" and "women" are synonymous (Section 2.3) and that the work of gender units only concerns women. Many respondents who did not work on gender issues in the ministries already had only vague ideas about the role of the gender unit in their ministry, and associated it primarily with female staff and with the organisation of events for Women's Day:

> *The unit is only about the promotion of the rights of women in the ministry. It gives women*

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122   Interviews with ministry staff working in gender, MOE and MCN.

123   Female respondent, MOJ.

a chance and it is trying to promote women. When it gets near to Women's Day this unit gets very active, but at other times we are more proactive than they are. Still, it is good to celebrate Women's Day for the sake of people who look after us and cook for us.[124]

As demonstrated in this statement, gender units are often perceived by ministry staff as institutions dedicated to the provision of welfare for women, and as a way of acknowledging their reproductive roles in the home. This description, however, sits more comfortably with the envisaged role for women's *shuras.*

Shuras — unlike the new gender units — tend to be historically grounded. While some *shuras* have only recently been established, the concept is not a new one within Afghan ministries and is modelled on a Soviet institution that existed in the civil service during the Russian occupation.

As mentioned above, the idea of *shuras* for women in ministries stems from the PDPA era, in which a concern for women's participation in the civil service led to welfare provisions for women in the workplace. Kindergartens were provided during this time and a focus on Women's Day (8 March) was encouraged.[125] Female civil servants employed in ministries during the PDPA regime in many cases still work in the same ministries; many had a "break" during the Taliban time. They hold lingering expectations concerning the role of women's *shuras.*[126] This serves to explain partially a continued emphasis on women's welfare inside the ministries and a preoccupation with celebrations for Women's Day.

The prioritisation of such events by staff working in both women's *shuras* and gender units alike evidently has an effect on the way in which gender mainstreaming is implemented. Furthermore, the Soviet approach, which was focused on welfare provisions and the celebration of women, appears more tangible than current international approaches, which are focused on abstract workshops and untranslatable terminology. Indeed, without specified groups of beneficiaries, gender mainstreaming as a concept is also problematic in this context. It is not aimed specifically at women in a particular ministry, or at women in general, but supposedly men and women, and essentially at structural gender inequalities that need to be addressed. With such an abstract, intangible target, it is unsurprising that gender mainstreaming has not been substantively taken up, or that Soviet methods of "including women" and the welfare approach are still commonly preferred and practiced (see Section 4.1).

One respondent from MOIA described her perception of the relationship between the women's *shura* and the gender unit in this ministry:

> *[R]ight now [a General] is the head and we hope that in the future the work of the shura will increase. This shura investigates some problems of the women personnel in the MOIA, who are working both in and outside of the Ministry… The job of the women's shura is to explore the problems of women working both inside and outside the MOIA. The gender unit also has the same job. There is a difference but I am not sure what it is. But gender is related to men and women, whereas the women's shura works only for women.[127]*

At the time of interview, the women's *shura* in MOIA (then not part of the *tashkil*) was relatively inactive, and the gender unit had not yet been officially formed (the respondent here refers to her perception of the general roles of women's *shuras* and gender units). The relationship between mechanisms may shift and develop in MOIA due to the newly assigned *tashkil* position for the *shura* and the official establishment of the unit. Clarification of the differing roles of women's *shuras* and gender units, though, is evidently still necessary. Without this distinction, gender units' role in affecting ministerial policy may well be submerged by a focus

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124   Male respondent, MRRD.

125   Deniz Kandiyoti, pers. comm.

126   Female respondents, MCN, MOJ, MOE.

127   Female respondent, MOIA.

on internal staff issues, which should be under the TOR of women's *shuras* or a Human Resources Department.

In the 2008 MOIA *tashkil,* the women's *shura* (called the Women's Affairs Unit) has been included under the General Director of Training and Education, but this directorate sits under the same Deputy Minister as the gender mainstreaming unit (an entirely new addition to the *tashkil*). The unit is located in a vertically more influential position than the *shura*, but their accountability to the same deputy, and the similar terminology used to describe their roles and responsibilities may lead to a blurring of their separate mandates. Also adding to the potential confusion is the existence of two "gender team members" within the Human Rights Department, who deal with violations by police of human rights relating to gender issues in the general population. This problem has, however, been anticipated with the recent establishment of the gender mainstreaming executive committee, which is intended to oversee the coordination among these three mechanisms and prevent the overlapping of their activities. It is vital for the effective functioning of these mechanisms that the executive committee is active in its coordinating role.

The MOE also has an issue with the blurring of unit and *shura* mandates. Here, a gender advisor has been appointed, presumably to work alongside the (formal) women's *shura*. The following respondent, however, described the tasks of the advisor in terms of welfare provisions for women, and distinguishes her role from that of the women's *shura* purely by status:

> *Respondent (R): When we persuade women to come and work in the ministries and other NGOs, we should give them more facilities, because women have many responsibilities at home also. For example, for the women who come out to work who have children, we should provide a good kindergarten. We should also provide health clinics for them...*

> *Interviewer (I): How could the women's* shura *be promoted, in your opinion?*

> *R: The women's* shura *has not done any activity through which people can recognise them and their activities. They have a very small office with two or three staff members. They cannot do anything except celebrate Women's Day.*

> *I: Ok, can you tell us what the difference is between the responsibilities of the advisor and those of the women's* shura?

> *R: [The advisor's] work will be distinguished from [the shura's] work, because [she is] an advisor and people listen to advisors more than women's* shura *staff.*

> *I: Do you think the women's* shura *should not exist anymore?*

> *R: Actually, [they] will work together. Only the leadership will change because they should report to [the advisor] who will discuss this with minister.*[128]

Again, the division of labour between mechanisms is unclear, to the extent that the risk of task-duplication, personality politics and leadership struggles is high.

Respondents in MRRD reported a problem with the way personnel have been allocated to the positions of women's representative (head of the women's *shura*) and head of the gender unit. Moreover, personality clashes between those in charge of gender mechanisms have to some extent determined the limited nature of the work of the unit and the *shura*. As described by one respondent, there is a distinct tension between the two mechanisms:

> *They had the idea for [a women's shura] but it is not functioning. Basically there is conflict between the women who are responsible for the shura and the gender unit – the same few women are responsible for them both.*[129]

This tension could be highly damaging to the

128   Female respondent, MOE.

129   Female international respondent.

potential effectiveness of both entities, and provides another reason for their mandates to be clearly distinguished.

GTZ-GM (most recently through the NGMS in MOWA) has attempted to distinguish the different roles and responsibilities of women's *shuras* and gender units over the course of the past six years. They have written several separate TORs for gender units and female staff representatives (FSRs), who are often the heads of women's *shuras.* According to GTZ-GM, one of the founding principles of the NGMS is that the functions of government policy, as dealt with by gender units, and the problems of female staff members, as tackled by *shuras*, are kept entirely separate.[130]

NGMS staff describes the TOR production process as being highly participatory, with consensus in monthly meetings of gender unit staff and FSRs gathered on what each role should involve. While clarifying the roles of these different entities should be encouraged, the TORs as they currently stand require further elaboration. For example, TORs instruct FSRs to have "close collaboration with the gender unit within the ministry" but give no specific recommendation as to how this might take place. Gender units are given an extensive list of ambitious tasks which appears not to take into consideration their current resource and capacity limitations. Furthermore, while instructions are given to FSRs, who may be the heads of women's *shuras*, very little in these documents outlines exactly what a women's *shura* should be and what role it should adopt in comparison with gender units. The reason for this is that the NGMS is intended to be policy-focused, and women's *shuras* do not and should not focus on policy-orientated issues. In practice, however, gender units do not always focus on policy-orientated issues either, and instead focus on problems of female staff.

As such, it is argued here that all types of mechanisms should be included in NGMS meetings, at least initially, in order to clearly distinguish mandates. Finally, these TORs often re-emphasise existing perceptions of women in ministries. The

first task of FSRs, according to the NGMS, is to be "a real advocate for women, patient, confidential, trustable, accessible, sociable, accountable and transparent."[131] This implies that women themselves must attempt to determine how they are viewed in the ministry in order to ensure that their behaviour is irreproachable lest others judge all women in the ministry according to the conduct of the FSR.[132] It also inherently condones existing stereotypes of how a "good woman" should behave. Interestingly, there appears to be an absence of similar documents detailing requirements for men to be patient and sociable.

As such, it can be seen that more consideration needs to be given to the division of labour between gender units, FSRs, and women's *shuras.* While the NGMS is undertaking a necessary task, it also remains to be seen how they will implement and adhere to these TORs in practice. With the distinct lack of any monitoring or evaluation system for gender mechanisms in ministries, ideal TORs on paper could remain far removed from the *de facto* practices of units and *shuras.* Furthermore, as argued earlier, ministry structures are unique: if generic TORs are to be made, they need only be flexible baseline suggestions from which ministry representatives can work. Fixed prescriptions in a "one-size-fits-all" approach could harm the promotion of mainstreaming in ministries, which are individual entities.

Units and *Shuras*: Perceptions of ministry staff

The confusion between units and *shuras*, and their lack of clear mandates, does not go unnoticed by other members of staff in the ministries. Ministry respondents not working officially on gender

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130   International observer.

131   GTZ-GM (NGMS), "Job descriptions for Female Staff Representatives,", (NGMS/ 2008).

132   Interestingly these set of irreproachable characteristics were seen as important for women MPs to maintain in a previous AREU study. Those women MPs who did not comply were shunned by male and female colleagues. Other women MPs voiced the concern that their reputation as women parliamentarians was tarnished by those who did not play by these unwritten rules of the game. Anna Wordsworth, "A Matter of Interests: Gender and the Politics of Presence in Afghanistan's Wolesi Jirga," (Kabul: AREU, 2007) 20.

issues raised the apparent lack of capacity of staff employed to promote gender issues in ministries as a problem. In phase one ministries, which all have gender units, criticisms of the staff of those units and their work were frequently made. In phase two, women's *shuras* themselves were considered malfunctioning and not particularly useful. One respondent from MOPH gave his opinions regarding the limitations of the gender unit in his ministry:

I think [the gender unit] has limited resources. I hardly ever hear that they have had any big achievements, and I have not participated in their trainings. I would have expected to have heard about these and to have been invited. When we do things, we start from the home and then we move outside. If we cannot implement programs at home, how can we do this outside? Maybe they have done something but I think they should have done more in the ministry itself. I think establishing MOWA and a Gender Unit does not make sense, because gender needs to be in different fields so that the people can understand the concept itself, then we could create opportunities for the differences between men and women to be diminished.[133]

Various shortcomings of gender units are identified here, but the most worrying is this quotation's emphasis on the negative image of gender units in ministries (which is widely representative of the data on this subject). This statement may illustrate some enthusiasm for more widely and substantively promoting gender issues. In institutions where a gender unit or *shura* may be the only source of information and training on gender issues, it is crucial that it is perceived by other ministry staff as useful and effective. Nonetheless, many criticisms of gender units and women's *shuras* were not based on substantial, grounded information: many respondents had limited contact with staff of these mechanisms. One way to approach this blockage in the flow of information is in the establishment of interdepartmental working groups.

4.2   Working groups

Without vertical *and* horizontal influence, a gender unit could be easily sidelined within a ministry, limiting its effectiveness. Interdepartmental working groups, on the other hand, with their members representing a wide range of departments across a ministry, have the potential to mainstream gender concerns across different ministerial programmes and policy. Indeed, this kind of mechanism is given as a feasible alternative to gender units by the NAPWA and the Government's Gender Mainstreaming Policy.[134] UNIFEM also supports this position. One international respondent described the rationale behind this preference:

In NAPWA it is suggested that the ministries have gender working groups instead of units and I think this is a very good idea. This means that you would not have a unit that is staffed by specific women (and men) assigned to gender, but that you would have a working group made up of the staff of different departments.[135]

In theory, gender working groups are designed to ensure effective communication and coordination of gender mainstreaming initiatives among ministerial departments. As such, their mandate coincides very well with that of gender mainstreaming in general. There are therefore good reasons for this suggestion made in NAPWA. Being by nature interdepartmental, working groups do not, though, occupy fixed positions within an institutional structure. They would likely sit outside the ministerial *tashkil*, which raises a problem of status, as discussed above (Section 4.1). Having said this, if connected to an influential ministry authority or department, ideally dealing with policymaking, the potential reach and influence of a gender working group could be substantial.

In the six ministries studied across the two phases of this research, only one formal gender working group has been found to exist — in MOPH. After a brief discussion of the ways in which this working group functions, this section will go on to look at whether this might be an effective tool in other ministries.

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133   Male respondent, MOPH.

134   GoA, "Gender Mainstreaming Policy" 104.

135   Female international respondent.

The MOPH has a gender working group which is coordinated and facilitated by its gender unit. While in theory this interdepartmental group would serve to counterbalance the operational sidelining of the unit within the reproductive health department, working group sessions currently put little emphasis on interdepartmental mainstreaming. They are instead used to discuss the current projects of the gender unit alone.[136] One respondent described the nature of working group meetings when asked about his participation in them, and coordination between his own department and the gender unit:

> It is the rule of our ministry that all departments should coordinate with each other as we all work on the health issue. But [my department] and the HIV department have closer coordination [than my department and the gender unit]. But the gender unit is also working on the health issue…and we attend their meetings. For example, we might be talking in a meeting and saying that a lady should have the right to have limited numbers of children, she should be able to specify how many children she has. Also, pregnant ladies should have the authority to go to community-based health clinics. We discussed these things in the gender meetings. These are the issues that we talk about, and then we talk about how to implement these things and suggest solutions to the problems, for example awareness-raising programmes, and health messages through the media so that people will be ready for women to have their rights.[137]

This quotation suggests that working group meetings are seen as belonging to the gender unit — "their meetings." This makes sense given that these meetings focus on gender unit activities and are chaired each week by the head of the unit. In spite of its interdepartmental nature, the group is perceived by this respondent to be an extension of the unit itself and to suffer from a lack of broad-based ownership. Furthermore, the examples given on the topics discussed in the working group all concern women's reproductive health. Nothing

is mentioned, for example, about how a gender-sensitive approach might be integrated into disease control programmes or into public policy on immunization. There is the further assumption that gender, too, is only a reproductive health concern, which explains the gender unit's position in the department.

The fact alone that this group exists and meets on a regular basis is no small feat, and should not be overlooked. Indeed, MOPH is the only ministry of the six case study ministries to have a gender unit and working group functioning, and indeed functioning in a coordinated manner. The fact that a good number of (male and female) staff members from different departments regularly attend these meetings is a demonstration (albeit indirect) of the perceived relevance of gender issues to their work. The shortcomings described above could be addressed with focused guidance to the gender unit and working group. While the structure of the MOPH currently limits the scope and reach of the unit, the working group provides a potential mechanism through which the work of other departments can be targeted for gender mainstreaming initiatives. A system of rotating leadership of the working group across departments, or leadership of the group by the department for policy making, might be a means to combat the exclusive focus on gender unit activities in working group sessions. Supported (but not always chaired) by full-time gender unit staff, a working group made up of members of other departments, who work on gender in addition to their other responsibilities, could potentially facilitate gender mainstreaming effectively across ministerial programmes and policy.

While the co-existence of a fixed gender unit and an interdepartmental gender working group does not automatically bring about successful mainstreaming, this working group + 1 structure is nonetheless a framework that other ministries could develop and implement. A working group *without* a gender unit (or other influential department or individual) might not have enough legitimate connection to the *tashkil* to make influential decisions. As such, a working group + 1 model is recommended here as a potential method to strengthen existing mainstreaming initiatives in other ministries.

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136   Field notes, MOPH.

137   Male respondent, MOPH (emphasis added).

In the MOE, for example, an interdepartmental working group on gender might prove a useful means to coordinate multifarious but seemingly sporadic gender activities. The MOE's structure is comprised of a huge number of departments, all apparently centering around eight main programmes in the National Education Strategy Plan.[138] At the time of writing, the ministerial organogram was still not available for staff to use, and few respondents in the MOE were able to describe how the ministry's departments coordinated with one another. There is evidently a need for operational-level coordination on gender issues - which could be provided by a gender working group. This group could be supported by connections to the highest authorities by the gender advisor to the Minister, who is already in (a vertically influential) position in the ministry. Thus, a mechanism to potentially support a gender working group, and keep it connected to top levels of leadership, exists.

Another particular reason why a working group is likely to be successful in the MOE is that there is already a commitment within the ministry to promoting gender equality in the services provided to the public, and a large number of women working in relatively senior positions. The education sector, like the health sector, is largely seen as one in which it is acceptable to address gender issues and in which substantially less resistance might be incurred by the promotion of a gender agenda. More could be done by national and international actors alike to take advantage of the MOE's relatively amenable institutional environment, as an example to other ministries in which more resistance to gender issues exists (discussed further in Section 4).

This brief analysis of two ministries' amenability to facilitating working groups on gender issues illustrates how such group structures and means of operation are markedly different. While it can be recommended that a working group continue to function/be established in both, it is clear that ministry-specific assessments will need to be made in order to ascertain what kind of "+ one" mechanism would be most effective.

This could be a gender unit, or advisor, or other influential individual or department; regardless, it is fundamental that this support mechanism is an established authority within the ministerial *tashkil*. Once two such complementary mechanisms are established within a ministry — dealing with vertical and horizontal mainstreaming, respectively — the issue of coordination between them will need to be considered.

4.3 Interministerial mechanisms

Having analysed ministerial mechanisms in some detail, it is necessary to broaden the perspective of this study and explore ways in which ministries coordinate with each other on gender issues. There are three interministerial gender mechanisms that are worth considering in depth: the NGMS, gender focal points, and gender budgeting initiatives in the MOF.

The NGMS

As introduced earlier, the NGMS is intended to be an information bank on governmental gender policy. According to one international observer,

> ...[the NGMS] was designed to make up for the failings of MOWA, by ensuring that MOWA accepted and learnt from the many other actors in other parts of the civil service outside their ministry working on gender issues.[139]

Set up as a result of an acknowledged need for more information sharing on gender issues in government and the civil service, the NGMS was initially the brainchild of the GTZ-GM Interministerial Working Group on Gender. The NGMS is currently located in MOWA, although the efficacy of this position (as opposed to one in, for example, the Office of the President) is the subject of debate. According to its staff, the NGMS' activities to date have focused more on coordinating work on gender issues in different ministries. These activities have included producing job descriptions/TORs for the different ministerial mechanisms and facilitating monthly

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138   Female international respondent

139   International observer, pers. comm.

meetings of ministry staff involved in work in gender issues.[140]

Why it was not set up prior to the establishment of various separate gender units in ministries is a question worth asking in hindsight; the NGMS seems to have been created as a remedy to problems with the implementation of mainstreaming which could have been earlier anticipated. Nevertheless, the NGMS could prove extremely useful if it succeeds in disseminating information on gender initiatives in ministries. It could also serve as a means to combat the mismatch of significant donor funding for gender projects without the national institutional capacity to implement them. If all international agencies working on gender issues were required to be accountable to the NGMS, the body could help to answer the frequent complaints of MOWA staff regarding an acute lack of coordination among international actors. While the effects of the NGMS are yet to be seen, it is certainly an initiative that has the potential to provide much-needed information-sharing, interministerial, and inter-agency coordination on gender issues.

One of the issues currently faced by the NGMS is its struggle to be seen as part of a national government, and not another international addition to the ministry. A current issue here is the gaining of a position within the MOWA *tashkil,*[141] as described by one respondent:

> [The NGMS] office is very integrated into MOWA, it does not work in parallel to MOWA, it is not like the other international offices here like UNIFEM, UNDP, UNFPA, JICA etc. Everyone thinks [the] office is under GTZ-GM but this is not true, it is part of MOWA. At the moment it is not in the tashkil, but [the NGMS] are having meetings with the Deputy Minister and she is very optimistic, and we are trying to put our

office into the new tashkil.[142]

There is no doubt that becoming an integrated part of national government, whether in MOWA or elsewhere, will help in some way to create a sense of Afghan ownership for this particular body. However, it is unclear as yet exactly how this new NGMS (established in August 2007), if indeed it does become part of MOWA, will relate to the gender unit in the Training and Advocacy department of the ministry. When phase one of this research was being conducted, this unit held responsibility for trying to coordinate gender units in different ministries.[143] According to NGMS staff, the two entities are beginning to coordinate their work: the GU staff attends NGMS meetings and selects potential recipients in line ministries for gender training together.[144]

Further, if the NGMS hopes to become a department within MOWA and an integral part of the Afghan administration — distancing itself from the international offices that are also located in the ministry — then it will need to distance itself also from the ways in which international offices function. One member of NGMS staff described how her office had assisted one MOWA department in getting funding for a project:

> We get proposals from the different departments in MOWA all the time. There are financial problems in MOWA and so when the different departments want to implement something they send proposals round to all the international offices in MOWA. We accepted one proposal from the education department, and we found the funding for them through the GTZ-GM education project (not through their GM project). The project was very successful — it was about informing women and girls about vocational courses that were available to them after they had graduated from high school, as university entrance is very difficult to achieve

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140   As a result of the activities of the NGMS related to the research team by NGMS staff, it has been categorised here as an interministerial mechanism. There is some dispute as to the accuracy of this categorisation, as the NGMS was intended as a governmental body to be established within a higher-level policy making body than MOWA. However, its current TOR as described by its staff members fits most appropriately into this section on interministerial gender initiatives.

141   See below for issues surrounding this position.

142   Female respondent, NGMS.

143   Male respondent, MOWA.

144   NGMS staff, pers. comm.

and there are not enough places.[145]

In spite of the fact that the funding sourced in this example did not come directly from the NGMS, undoubtedly the perception of this department as an internationally-established one is strengthened by such apparent provisions of project funds.

There is however a further problem concerning the location of the NGMS at present, and there exist conflicting views on the subject. On the one hand, should the NGMS move and become influential (to the Office of the President, for example), there may be a movement (once again) to abolish MOWA altogether. Current NGMS staff appears to prefer that, for the time being, the NGMS stay in MOWA, adding that it should attempt, as far as possible, to be more influential within the ministry through becoming part of the *tashkil.* On the other hand, if it were to remain within MOWA (and be included in the ministry *tashkil*), with MOWA, being equal in status to other ministries, it would not have the power to directly influence the policies of those ministries.

Furthermore, an NGMS in the Office of the President (as opposed to within MOWA) would be able to have more influence to assign responsibility for gender mainstreaming to individual ministries themselves. This would certainly contribute to a ministry-specific (as opposed to blanket) approach to the mainstreaming strategy, which could be more effective and sustainable. Moreover, if MOWA was discontinued as a ministry, mainstreaming initiatives would already be established in line ministries and not completely lost as a result. These arguments support the notion that the NGMS be based in the Office of the President. If this move were to take place, however, it would be important to emphasise, firstly, the primary responsibility of line ministries to mainstream gender themselves, and secondly to MOWA and others that the NGMS would not be in competition to the Ministry, but that the two entities together could form a more effective national machinery with a greater combined ability

to promote mainstreaming.[146]

It is useful to look at the NGMS' principal activities at present: primarily, it coordinates meetings between representatives of gender units and female ministry staff. For establishing interministerial contacts and instituting a sense of solidarity across ministries, this is a useful initiative and one that is long overdue. However, the NGMS needs to be wary of losing the support of its attendees:

> *I attend the meetings in GTZ-GM [NGMS] but their plan is very weak. They don't support us financially but they support us technically. When we attend their meetings, they just provide us with lunch and they have given us one computer per person as well (which I don't use because I have my own office computer).*[147]

Evidently the technical training provided at these meetings is not always highly valued by those who attend, and many respondents suggested that financial — as opposed to technical — support would be of more use. This is not to say that financial assistance is always useful or appropriate or that more should be given, but rather that the potential results of the technical training given must be made clearly visible to those taking part. Meetings for meetings' sake will only be useful for the limited amount of time it takes to build contacts and establish interministerial networks.

As discussed above in Section 3.1, one potentially useful tool that has come out of these (and previous) meetings is the production of separate TORs for gender units and Female Staff Representatives (FSRs). However, more thought still needs to be put into the division of labour between units and FSRs, and further, these TORS must be flexible enough to respond to different ministries' structures.

Finally, in interviews, NGMS staff strongly emphasised that all gender mechanisms in ministries should be accountable to the NGMS. Thus, all donors or

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146   With thanks to an anonymous reviewer for their comments on this debate.

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145   Female respondent, NGMS.

147   Female respondent, MCN.

international agencies wanting to set up funding for such mechanisms should do so through the NGMS rather than independently. The NGMS's ability to coordinate donors will be fundamental to its usefulness as a mechanism, though this is unlikely to be an easy task. Some tension over the initial formation of the NGMS office appears to have arisen among various international actors. Reportedly, MOWA assigned a number of different agencies the task of setting up an information-sharing body for work on gender mainstreaming in ministries, which caused an element of "turf-warring" over the task.[148] If the NGMS cannot consolidate all activities on gender in the ministries — an aim put forward by its current staff members — its credibility within those ministries will soon be undermined. For the mechanism to be successful, different international actors must recognise the value in a consolidated approach.

Focal Points

Gender focal points are individuals allocated the task of providing a link between a ministry and another organisation or ministry, such as UNDP, ANDS, GTZ-GM or MOWA. One individual may be a focal point for more than one external agency. A significant number of national and international respondents from various external organisations and ministries talked about focal points, which apparently exist in all six case study ministries. There was little discussion, though, about how this mechanism did, in fact, promote gender mainstreaming. National and international respondents frequently offered vague answers to questions about focal points, and were often unable to elucidate their actual responsibilities. This lack of clarity implies that the sheer existence of these mechanisms is more important than their

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Box 4: "Women's problems"

The rhetoric of "women's problems" features in many interviews across both phases. Whether this phrase implies that women have many problems, or describes the role of a women's representative or gender unit in "solving" women's problems, it occurs repeatedly and is mentioned by men and women alike. This highlights, as the respondent above rightly notes, a difficulty in identifying particular problems that women do experience and also a lack of insight into why they might experience those particular problems. This is not limited to the discussion of focal points, however: indeed, according to ministry respondents, all gender mechanisms appear to be burdened in some way or another with the responsibility of dealing with such problems.

The research team frequently encountered a contradiction in respondent statements that, on the one hand, the women's shura in a ministry was tasked with handling "women's problems," and on the other hand, that women didn't have any problems in their respective ministries. This was particularly the case in the MOE. Here, the high number of female staff in senior positions and ministry's commitment to increase female child enrolment in schools was often equated to gender having been "achieved" and women staff therefore having no problems. This may prove an issue for those attempting to monitor and evaluate gender issues within the ministry. A comprehensive framework for the analysis or disaggregation of certain kinds of "women's problems" may need to be established before any kind of useful data can be collected.

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intended purposes. The rhetoric of the necessity of focal points, as of women's *shuras*, may also exist in ministries as a remnant of the Soviet era.[149] One respondent from MCN talked about the role of MOWA focal points. When asked about the specific activities of focal points, again, the usefulness of meetings was called into question:

> [MOWA Focal points] meet and discuss the problems of women…When there is a meeting, women easily and simply say that they don't have any problems and difficulties. "We go

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148   Various international respondents.

149   Fodor notes that focal points existed under soviet regimes in Europe, but that they were largely nominal in their roles (in data collection and report-writing) within companies and municipalities. Fodor, "Gender Mainstreaming," 12.

according to the plan," women say. In fact they can't identify their problems — otherwise, if they don't have any problems, why are there so many meetings for women held and what we are meeting for?[150]

According to this respondent, focal points have little use other than to discuss the nature of "women's problems," as discussed in Box 4.

Another theme emerging from the data collected on focal points is the direction of their accountability. Interviews across both phases indicated that, while focal points in general attend meetings of the organization with which they are affiliated (e.g. MOWA, GTZ-GM), their role as focal point is not firmly grounded or established in their base ministry. One focal point described how he perceived his role:

My responsibility is to have meetings with the Women's Association in [our ministry] and they share their activities and any problems and issues which women are facing in the ministry and then I can discuss these with MOWA. But unfortunately the Women's Association in [our ministry] has very few activities, they do not invite me to their meetings and even I do not know when they hold their meetings. That is why I give my own opinion and ideas in meetings with MOWA, because I do not know what this Women's Association in [our ministry] is doing.[151]

A number of other interviews reflected this sentiment, and the data clearly indicate that this particular mechanism, in its current state, is relatively redundant as a means to further gender mainstreaming. It is recommended here that unless gender focal points' accountability towards base ministries (and mechanisms such as women's *shuras* or gender units within them) is radically strengthened, their work should not continue, as it currently serves to confuse the process of gender mainstreaming in ministries.

Gender budgeting in the MOF

A final interministerial mechanism to consider is the role of the MOF in its training of line ministries in budget preparation. Clearly, the budget department of the MOF plays a key role in determining which projects (in which ministries) are successful in their applications for funding and which are not. On budget application forms, sections for gender considerations exist, but according to one staff member of MOF, ministries often have difficulty elaborating on the how their projects reflect gender equitable values:

Now it is a requirement that line ministries consider gender issues when preparing their budget. For the development budget, we ask them to identify pro-gender projects... Actually the forms are not very clear. They have four blocks, one for each of the cross-cutting issues. Line ministries often tick the box to say that their project is gender sensitive, but they do not say how. They don't fill in that part of the form, although there is a section for it.[152]

If the GBU was used to its full potential, gender mainstreaming might be able to gain a considerable foothold in government ministries using the significant influence of the MOF on their activities in general. At present, the short-staffed GBU is attempting to make the budget form more comprehensible to those working in the line ministries. However, not only do the budget forms require change, as the above respondent went on to explain, but an element of resistance exists at the senior levels of MOF in the funding of gender-related projects:

The problem is that ministry gender units don't have documents to convince the MOF that their projects should be financed. We had a proposal from the MOPH gender unit and we were not able to convince the budget committee members to allocate funding to this. They said that MOWA was doing these things, so why should we duplicate what they are doing? I tried to convince them that MOWA's work was different

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150   Female respondent, MCN.

151   Male respondent, MOJ.

152   Male respondent, MOF.

but they didn't listen. We need people in these units who can design project proposals and convince people that these projects are worth funding. The workshops and trainings that are proposed at the moment just aren't enough to convince the committee to allocate funding.[153]

There are two issues to consider. First, the capacity to produce suitable budget proposals for projects with gender components is lacking. This could perhaps be remedied through very specific training courses for those involved. The second is of a more concerning nature — namely, that the existence of MOWA and the perception of its ability to undertake projects itself either averts senior decision-makers from allocating funding for gender mainstreaming or gives them an excuse to avoid doing so. In these examples, then, some of the pitfalls of the system — a mixed system of women and gender mechanisms within a national machinery that lacks one consolidated strategy for pursuing gender goals — become clear.

Nevertheless, the importance of the existence of the GBU within the MOF should not be underestimated. While at present its influence within the ministry, as with gender units in other ministries, is somewhat limited, the staff of the GBU has significant amounts of contact time with other line ministries. Furthermore, issues of funding to support gender mainstreaming initiatives are paramount, and the more this is officially recognised, the better.

Interministerial mechanisms to promote gender issues across ministries are undoubtedly a positive step forward in the attempt to counter these pitfalls; coordination among ministry mechanisms is paramount. The NGMS could potentially unite a variety of approaches to mainstreaming from one base point, provided that it becomes an established feature of national government — ideally within the Office of the President — and that all donor support is channeled through this mechanism and MOWA. Focal points are not particularly useful at present and, unless points of accountability are strengthened, should be discontinued. Lastly, the potential influence of the GBU in the MOF on the

functioning of line ministries — provided it is given the required vertical and horizontal status — is highly significant.

4.4 International technical advisors

One further mechanism to consider is that of international technical advisors or gender specialists employed in the ministries to assist with gender mainstreaming. These exist in MOIA and MRRD (NABDP programme) but not MOPH, MOJ or MCN. In MOE, a national gender advisor has recently been recruited, but to date no internationals working in the ministry deal exclusively with gender issues.[154] MOWA also has a large contingent of international technical advisors representing six international agencies.[155] National respondents' opinions vary significantly as to how useful this kind of international assistance actually is, ranging from unhelpful to indispensable, but very few talked about the benefits of technical support. Instead, they emphasised the need for continued financial assistance. However, international respondents suggested that without international technical advisors, producing policy documents and meeting deadlines (such as those imposed by the recent I-ANDS processes) would have been impossible in any ministry. One international representative described the process of preparing documents for the I-ANDS:

Recently MOWA has been requested by the ANDS Secretariat to review the strategy papers of all the ministries from a gender perspective. MOWA has reviewed and commented on 44 of these papers. Now MOWA has also been requested to work on the sector strategy papers and is currently preparing 22 of these. MOWA was sent the templates of all of these and asked to review them again from a gender perspective. They are expected to finalise these by the end of the month, and then they will be sent back

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153   Male respondent, MOF.

154   The distinction between national and international advisors is made here only because this section discusses the political agendas behind international assistance. The distinction is not used to imply that one or the other is in any way superior.

155   These include two programmes from JICA, TAF, UNDP, UNIFEM, GTZ-GM and UNFPA.

to MOWA for more comments. The reality is that this is not done by MOWA, it is done by [external agencies]. All the documents are in English, they are sent across to MOWA in English…I think the I-ANDS is like a picture of a cake - it is beautiful but you cannot eat it. None of the staff here know what it is about. We are trying to include the staff in the process but it is difficult as we cannot keep up with the pace of the ANDS procedures.[156]

These time restrictions during the ANDS process had widespread effects. According to other international representatives, the process has emphasised the shortcomings of all ministries, in that their strategy papers have, to a large extent, been written by international consultants.[157] This in itself also highlights the unrealistic nature of ANDS' demands. The process appears to have ignored limited capacity in ministries, in spite of the fact that this limited capacity was known about prior to the forming of the ANDS process. It also highlights how the meeting of deadlines was prioritised over the production of satisfactory results within the process.[158]

This apparently indispensable international assistance, however, is far from coordinated. Various different agencies have taken up gender mainstreaming as a significant part of their work in Afghanistan: UNDP is "modelling" it, UNIFEM "implementing" it, and GTZ-GM is involved in the establishment of gender units in ministries and the NGMS for mainstreaming purposes.[159] All of these agencies work toward the ultimate goal of increased gender equality in Afghanistan, but each has a different strategy, and a different (but overlapping) set of five or six ministries in which to focus their efforts. Each justifies the choice of

which ministries in different ways.[160] As mentioned in Section 3.3, a comprehensive international buy-in of the potentially effective NGMS is yet to be seen. Until this buy-in happens, assistance on gender issues will remain fragmented and its usefulness will be curtailed. Considering these agencies' common objectives, there could be much more coordination among these agencies on formulating a joint strategy for assistance with gender mainstreaming.[161]

The biggest problem, however, with ministerial reliance on international support is that gender mainstreaming — already seen as an international project — can also be seen as a temporary, unsustainable one. With so little time to build the capacity of gender specialists or practitioners, who are also limited in number in Afghanistan at present, there is a substantial lack of national ownership of mainstreaming. This is not due to a lack of support for women's rights within civil society: a number of NGOs, community service organisations and other bodies promote women's interests in Afghanistan. The problem is that this very rarely translates into policy. Furthermore, as explored in Section 2.3, "gender" is widely seen as an external concept and is not broadly used within the women's movement, which focuses (justifiably) on women and women's rights.[162] One potential means to increase national ownership of gender has been the commissioning of a Gender Studies Institute at Kabul University by UNDP.[163] This institute will train Afghans in gender analysis and awareness, and thus develop a pool of national experts to work in the field.

Based on this analysis of existing gender mechanisms, substantially more must be done technically and structurally (by national and international actors) to encourage gender mainstreaming at

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156   Female international respondent, emphasis added.

157   Various international respondents.

158   Female international respondent, and field notes (I-ANDS meetings).

159   Various international respondents.

160   Interviews, international respondents.

161   This is an initial impression that will be analysed further in the second phase of this research.

162   This is reflected in the names of national NGOs and NGO networks working for women - for example Afghan Women's Network, Humanitarian Assistance for Women and Children of Afghanistan, etc. As far as the researcher is aware there is no nationally-owned NGO or CSO body promoting *gender* equity specifically.

163   Female international respondent

ministry level. Gender units and women's *shuras* are not the distinct entities they could be, and concerns exist regarding their positions within ministry *tashkils*. Evidently, individual ministry structures must be used as tools with which to map gender mainstreaming programmes strategically. Interdepartmental mechanisms in ministries have the potential to be effective, provided that they have strong connections to senior policy makers within the ministry structure and clarified relationships to existing mechanisms, such as gender units. Interministerial mechanisms on a broader scale are fundamental to the cross-sectoral success of gender mainstreaming, and those such as the NGMS and GBU in the MOF are potentially useful tools. Finally, the coordination of the work of technical advisors will be necessary to promote and generate support for gender mainstreaming at the international level, but it should be clearly emphasised that their presence is not sustainable. A strengthened focus on capacity building is highly necessary in order to promote the longevity of mainstreaming initiatives. Mainstreaming will continue to be seen as an international appendage to the Afghan administration until sufficient capacity and political will have been generated within ministries themselves.

5.   Institutional Environment

This paper has discussed, to this point, technical and structural concerns for the promotion of gender mainstreaming and has assessed tangible mechanisms currently operating. This, however, only provides a small part of the explanation as to why gender mainstreaming may or may not be functioning in Afghan ministries. In order to gain a more in-depth understanding of the situation, it is necessary to look more holistically at the functioning of ministries and the differing institutional cultures found within them. This section begins by exploring these institutional cultures, and then moves on to address the ways in which institutional reforms are being implemented, and to what end, within the Afghan administration. As a result of this examination, a more comprehensive analysis of the prospects for gender mainstreaming in ministries can be made. Essentially, a lack of active political will from both national and international actors currently hinders the progress of gender mainstreaming.

5.1   Institutional cultures

Before discussing institutional cultures in detail, it is necessary to explain further what is meant here by the term. According to North, an institution is a set of rules by which social activity is governed.[164] While a ministry in itself is an institution, there exists within it not one but several institutional cultures or systems which interact to determine to various extents "how things are done." Competing "rules of the game," or institutional systems that overlap within ministries, affect the implementation of policies such as gender mainstreaming. For example, a new affirmative action policy requiring the recruitment of women might collide with entrenched systems of male-dominance within a ministry, and possibly prevent such a policy from being effectively implemented.

Institutional cultures can be long established, or recently formed, but the extent to which they operate and by whom they are upheld is often in a state of flux. While it might be assumed that the older the ministry, the more "traditional" and uncompromising the institutional culture, this is not altogether true. Institutional cultures are by no means static and shift according to political and socio-economic factors. For example, the MCN may be a "new" ministry, having been formed after 2001, but this is not to say that its employees came to their jobs at the MCN without expectations and preconceptions formed during their previous work in other institutions. One respondent from MRRD discussed a similar point by making a distinction between different kinds of employees within ministries:

> The contracted staff is more modern-minded than the civil servants, as sometimes the civil servants are old-minded and they do not accept new terminologies… [T]he contracted staff mainly come from different countries and they are highly educated… [While overseas] they were able to adopt a global mindset and when they came back to Afghanistan they were ready to introduce new ideas. As for the civil servant staff — if they were hired by MRRD then most of them have been here for 20 years, and they have not changed their environment. They haven't gone outside MRRD to see what happens in other places. This is a general occurrence in the ministries in Afghanistan. People are recruited once and then they stay in the same place, and don't get familiar with other offices or NGOs. This is why they are not active or moving forward.[165]

This perceived difference between the attitudes of long-standing civil servants and newer, contracted staff is found in the data gathered from all six case study ministries. While the distinction is not always as stark as this respondent states, there

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164   Douglass North, "Economic Performance through Time" (Prize Lecture, The Sveriges Riksbank Prize in Economic Sciences in Memory of Alfred Nobel, 1993) http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/economics/laureates/1993/north-lecture.html, (accessed 23 October 2007).

165   Male respondent, MRRD.

clearly exist subtle (and less subtle) differences between staff groups. Previous employment is found to be a significant factor in determining people's expectations and attitudes towards their working environment. To varying extents, donor interventions within ministries create further distinctions between groups of staff, particularly in terms of wage differentials.[166] Thus, generalisations according to institutional cultures in specific ministries cannot be made.

Moreover, the continuation of practices adopted during previous regimes in Afghanistan is evident in all six case study ministries, in spite of their various institutional ages. Certain institutional cultures have survived over time and regime-change, while others have not. It is interesting to look at why this is the case, and useful to analyse what effect the continuance of particular institutional cultures will have on gender mainstreaming processes. Three examples of these cultures are explored here: those of welfare expectations, *khedmat/wasita* (service provision/connections), and perceptions of gendered hierarchies. These examples have been selected due to their prominence in the data collected: on detailed analysis of the data, these three topics emerged as overarching themes.

Welfare expectations

A persistent theme in interviews with ministry staff throughout both phases of this study has been the high expectations, or sense of entitlement, coming from ministerial staff that their employer/the ministry provide them with welfare provisions or services. According to the majority of respondents across all six ministries, the Soviet era was a time of prosperity and one in which civil servants enjoyed a certain number of benefits in return for their commitment to government operations. A number of people interviewed talked about the coupons or rations that ministry staff received for staple

foodstuffs as part of their salaries,[167] and of the welfare-based approach taken by this particular regime:

> *[In the Soviet times] the people working in the ministries had rations from the government. They were very satisfied with their jobs.[168]*

> *In Najeeb's time, everything was cheap and our salary was enough for us. We used to get Kupan (some amount of items for civil servant given by government such as tea, sugar and beans) but now our salary is only 2000Afs which is not enough for us.[169]*

> *[The Soviets] had the slogan of Food, Clothes and Shelter. They wanted to implement these three points. They ruled in Afghanistan for 14 years.[170]*

Interestingly, a continuation of the "food, clothes, and shelter" approach can be noted, both in the expectations of ministry staff and in the functioning of ministries in seeking to meet such expectations. One key example lies with the women's *shura* in MCN, in which a vote was taken to decide how an allocation of money should be spent. One respondent described the outcome of this decision-making process:

> *An NGO which works on promoting women's interests in the country donated us some amount of money (50,000 Afs) and some other amount of money from the Colombo Plan for the celebration of women's day. After I got this amount of money, I called all the women to have their opinions on spending this money, everyone said that we should celebrate the women's day in the Golden Star Hotel. I wanted*

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166   For a more detailed analysis of bureaucratic reforms and the layering of staff groups in the Afghan civil service since 2001, see Mark Sedra and Peter Middlebrook, "Afghanistan's Problematic Path to Peace: Lessons in State-building in the Post-September 11 Era," *Foreign policy in focus* (FPIF), http://www.fpif.org/papers/2004afgh-stbuild.html, (accessed June 2008).

167   When these provisions were discontinued, salaries effectively decreased as a result. Many respondents voiced the opinion that the government should compensate for this loss. (With additional thanks to an anonymous reviewer for comments on this point.)

168   Female respondent, MCN.

169   Female respondent, MOE.

170   Male respondent, MOJ.

to make a trust fund for the women of the ministry but it was not approved by the women. In the celebration, I distributed 70,000Afs to women in cash.[171]

This describes an attempt to change an already established institutional culture, and its failure among those who perhaps see more immediate benefit in the maintaining of the status quo. It could also be the case that the members of the women's *shura*, as described in the example, were not able to imagine an alternative to the celebration of women's day in a more conventional manner — a case of "we do it this way because we always have done." It can be seen that the use of "bottom-up," democratic decision-making techniques — relatively recently introduced to ministerial cultures — emphasised, as opposed to altered, an established expectation. Furthermore, reactions from other female members of staff towards the above cited respondent have been somewhat negative as a result of this attempted instigation of institutional change.[172]

This example further illustrates perceptions of the role of gender units and women's *shuras* as discussed earlier (Section 3.2). The influence of a welfare-based approach is still very much present in ministry operations. It would be inaccurate to assume, however, that this approach stems solely from the Soviet regime. Firstly, the funding given to the MCN women's *shura* described above was given by international agencies specifically for the commemoration of women's day. This demonstrates compliance with, if not encouragement of, the promotion of women's welfare expectations and considerable focus on this celebration. This is one of many ways in which the international initiatives can reinforce existing institutional cultures, which may be counterproductive for gender mainstreaming. Secondly, the priorities of women in general — as depicted in the quotation — demonstrate the dominance of a short-term perspective focused on immediate benefit.

This kind of short-term outlook and concern with practical welfare needs is reflected across interviews in the six case-study ministries and has also been noted as a key characteristic of MPs' priorities in Parliament.[173] This approach is not specific to Afghanistan, and can be partially attributed to the post-conflict context and the three decades of war, which have significantly affected people's willingness to consider long-term solutions or to trust that the current security situation is not likely to worsen. As such, a number of factors can be seen to contribute to an institutional culture that emphasises a focus on welfare provision and short term gains.

It is necessary to ask, then, how this particular aspect of institutional culture might affect processes of gender mainstreaming in ministries. As discussed here and above (Section 3.2), institutional culture can render the priorities of gender mechanisms entirely welfare-based, and can detract from a focus on mainstreaming a gender perspective through policy and planning. As demonstrated in the example above, this involves not only attitudes but also resources being directed towards a women-only approach. In turn, this tends to strengthen stereotypes of female staff: they are perceived as a needy, marginalised group of people who should be celebrated once a year. This image of female staff within ministries could seriously affect the ways in which gender mainstreaming is received by high-level policy makers. They may be able to reject mainstreaming proposals on the basis that they are doing enough for women by supporting an annual event or allowing the establishment of a gender unit. Furthermore, if a precedent has been set linking gender mainstreaming to welfare, ministry progammes and policies *not* related to welfare provision may exclude gender concerns as irrelevant. Finally, the marginalization of women (strengthened by welfare expectations) is entirely opposite to the very core of mainstreaming, which proposes the widespread consideration of gender issues. Whether a focus on women only (as opposed to gender mainstreaming) is considered appropriate or not, the combination of women with welfare in this context is not conducive to the furthering of a rights-based approach.

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171   Female respondent, MCN.

172   Female respondents, MCN.

173   Wordsworth, "A Matter of Interests," 13-15.

Khedmat and Wasita

A second example of (interlinked) institutional cultures existing in all six ministries at present are those of *khedmat* (service provision) or *wasita* (a patron or influential person acting on one's behalf). Directly translated, the concept of *khedmat* describes the general provision of services to others. In Afghanistan, and particularly when combined with the notion of *wasita*, the term is often used to imply patron-client relations, or the provision of services to particular recipients, and as part of a consensual bargain. It is connected to issues of authority and power. *Khedmat/wasita* can take a variety of forms. It involves the usage of family, ethnic, or regional connections with influential people to one's advantage in securing reputation, acquiring jobs, or obtaining credit or protection, for example. Many respondents in the study referred to the approval and active support — *khedmat*, in other words — of a *wasita* or person of senior authority within or outside of the ministry. This *khedmat* was perceived as fundamental to getting good jobs, to the influencing of policy decisions, and, by extension, to the furthering of gender concerns:

> *...Almost everyone is appointed according to their connections. For example if there is someone with a PhD and someone with a masters degree applying for the same job, the person with the masters degree will get the position if he has a relative in a high level in the ministry.*[174]

> *The fact that we even have a gender unit shows that the leadership is supportive...I don't know if there are gender units in other ministries. If they do have them, then their job is to improve policies according to gender, so they must have support from the leadership otherwise they would not be able to function.*[175]

> *I didn't face any problems in my department because the minister and his deputies pay attention to us even though we are a small*

> *[gender] unit. This is why the other departments respect us. But the problems come when we have meetings outside the ministries.*[176]

These quotations reflect many respondents' opinions regarding the issue of patronage from figures of authority, and demonstrate the importance assigned to the gaining of senior-level support of some kind. This has various implications for the furthering of a gender agenda in ministries. The first, as encountered above in the discussion of ministry *tashkils* (Section 3.1), is that in order to have any influence on policy making, gender mechanisms need the direct support of the highest authorities in the ministry. The second issue, however, is more problematic: if significant emphasis is placed on *rawabit*, or "useful relationships," with *individuals,* then any systems or procedures established in ministries under the auspices of one minister are likely to change when that individual is no longer in post. This point was explained by one respondent from MOWA:

> *In Afghanistan when we want to build something we start with laying bricks. But in the ministry, one minister starts to build the house with some bricks (meaning putting in place some heads of departments and other staff) and then another minister comes and starts building the house with completely different bricks (bringing in new staff according to their relatives and the ones they want, they change all the staff). This is why when the minister changes, everything changes — the plans, the programmes — so that's why the programmes are not implemented... Relations or rawabit is the way that positions in the ministry are created and there is no motivation.*[177]

In many of these institutional cultures, greater efforts are put into maintaining relationships in the short-term, rather than longer-term systems that will outlast those relationships. In this way, any gains made in promoting gender mainstreaming will need to be remade when new staff is appointed.

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174   Female respondent, MOE.

175   Male respondent, MRRD.

176   Female respondent, MRRD.

177   Female respondent, MOWA.

Mainstreaming is inherently based on functioning, continuing (if evolving) systems, without which it is left to the whims of influential individuals, who cannot be guaranteed to promote gender equality strongly or consistently.

Another factor stemming from this relational institutional culture is the way in which potential employees attain positions in ministries (see also Section 4.2). In both phases, respondents talked about the fact that people were able to secure jobs as a result of their connections, or *wasita*. This occurs despite Priority Reform and Restructuring (PRR) initiatives, as explored later. One respondent from MOE explained his perception of this practice in his own ministry:

> *I cannot say that there is not wasita existing in this ministry. I have noticed that connections are preferred to regulations…The slogan of PRR is to give work to the qualified person, but sometimes this does not take place…Once a member of ministry staff came to me and asked me not to pass a woman who is the headmistress in one of the Kabul schools. I asked that person why, and who ordered that. That person said, "I want this to be done." I said, "Who are you? I am not going to listen to anyone except the minister." And the other day I and [another person] set the exam for that woman — she was great and she passed with 98 marks.[178]*

This quotation describes the assumption on the part of ministry staff that connections to those in positions of authority (in this case, those on the PRR examining committee) will be amenable to persuasion and provision of *khedmat/wasita*. In this instance, it appears that a new institutional culture (in the form of PRR) was preferred, but respondents suggested in interviews that this was not always the case and that nepotism was a common phenomenon in ministries.

Internationals working in Afghanistan often assume that this kind of relational institutional culture is inherent to "the way things are" in the country.[179] Indeed, it may be true that there are certain generally accepted rules of the game in Afghanistan which could be related to a culture of patronage-based service provision more broadly. However, it should be noted that cultures of *khedmat/wasita* are far from static, and are influenced by varying socio-political factors such as the economic environment, regional security and even ethnicity, for example. They are also cultivated differently in different contexts — each ministry may have its own network of patron-client relations determining ministry-specific rules.

In this context, bureaucratic systems have had only seven years to become re-established following thirty years of war. External authorities have often dictated the (new) ways in which these systems should be re-established. Given this, it is unsurprising that ministry staff often revert to previously established institutional cultures such as *khedmat/wasita*, even if the operation of such systems has changed over time.

Cultures of *khedmat/wasita* could have numerous effects on the promotion of gender mainstreaming, as they can be deeply ingrained and can affect all ministry policies and procedures. One specific effect worth highlighting is that women (and particularly newly-recruited women) often do not have access to the established patronage networks that men might utilise and so may miss out on the potential benefits of these connections. This may have implications in terms of the kinds of programmes on which they are able to work, as positions working on more prominent ministry programmes, with larger amounts of funding, may be reserved for those with the patronage connections to attain them.[180] This would go against the aim of increasing

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178   Male respondent, MOE.

179   Interviews, international respondents. This perspective on Afghan "rules of the game" is not specific to Afghanistan per se but is often a complaint of the international community working in environments where nepotism is known to be widespread. It is further acknowledged here that cultures of *khedmat/wasita* are found in many societies, not least Western democracies, in which merit-based systems are often "topped-up" with strategic connections to influential individuals/ organisations.

180   However this is not the case, for example, with the NSP programme, which at the time of data collection had three female

numbers of women in leadership in the GoA's gender mainstreaming policy. Furthermore, if cultures of *khedmat/wasita* are dominant over new systems of PRR and positive discrimination, for example, these reform measures will do little to establish a critical mass of qualified women in ministries (Section 4.2). If the merit-based principles of PRR are not adhered to, with preference for *khedmat*-based appointments instead, posts for specialist positions such as gender advisors (which require a certain level of expertise) may not be filled adequately as a result.

Perceptions of gendered hierarchies

A third example of an institutional culture existing in ministries is that of systems of gendered discrimination against women, or patriarchy. There are various stereotypes, held by internationals and Afghans alike, concerning patriarchal culture and the gendered hierarchies that it produces in Afghanistan. However, the following exploration of the subject finds that there is no *one* culture in place that systematically marginalises women; rather, a range of factors contribute to the ways in which women are prevented from attaining positions of authority, which include ethnicity, class and age, among other things.[181] Essentially, women entering ministries with certain values, norms and needs often come across institutions formed around the differing values and needs of their male counterparts. It is useful to explore perceptions of gendered hierarchies as discussed by respondents in ministries, in order to analyse the effects they have on the furthering of gender mainstreaming.

Across interviews in the majority of ministries (interestingly, with the exception of the MOE), it was found that certain women have secured their positions through PRR, positive discrimination measures or through their rank and reputation as attained in the Soviet era. These women, and particularly those in high positions, have at times faced opposition from male colleagues. One senior

member of staff of a ministry talked about how her role had been limited by ministry authorities:

Unfortunately… people do not like women to be in power or work in executive positions. So they have limited my authorities here…We had an executive meeting in which the minister, deputies and minister's high authorities participated. I talked about my department's promotion and submitted all the reports. When the participants saw that this department had developed and that there was no corruption, they decided to limit my authorities. They did this just to show the president and the people that women cannot work in leadership positions.[182]

This statement describes the respondent's own interpretation of a system of male dominance. There may have been other factors contributing to the outcome of this situation. Nonetheless, the perception of gendered hierachies, and the internalisation of their existence (whether acknowledged, as in this case, or not) can be just as potent and restricting as the actual existence of patriarchal systems.

Any set of rules or institutional culture determining appropriate levels of authority for women that may exist in ministries will collide with the new system of PRR, which is supposed to function on principles of merit. Such cultures would also clash with newly-introduced measures of positive discrimination (Section 4.2). As such, a woman who is able to navigate PRR or positive discrimination initiatives successfully may still have difficulties. She may not necessarily control how her TOR or employment might be altered or limited at random by higher authorities once in post, as a result of another pre-existing and predominant institutional culture. Indeed, those in power are in a position to alter the rules of the game as and when they choose.[183]

Women's participation in ministry leadership and decision-making could be considerably limited by

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heads of department in its head office at the MRRD.

181   Deniz Kandiyoti, "Gender, Power and Contestation," 140.

182   Female respondent.

183   Kandiyoti, "Gender, Power and Contestation," 142.

this existence of a male higher authority, which may have the final word and may overturn any decisions made by women in ostensibly senior positions. In this way, institutionalised gendered hierarchies can significantly hinder the progress of gender mainstreaming initiatives, and particularly initiatives attempting to encourage women's participation in decision-making.

The way women are perceived in their working roles depends on the ministry (and indeed department) in question. For example, MRRD and MOE both appear quite progressive in their support for women in leadership. There are several female heads of department in both ministries who appear to be highly respected by male and female colleagues alike. It is interesting, then, that senior male members of staff in MRRD and MOE described why female employees were respected in terms of biological determinism:

> *Women are always honest people. They will not get corrupt so easily. They have integrity. Women have this more than men. They are less corrupt and this is why I have two women heads of departments...The evidence is in the natural characteristics of women... If you put them in senior positions then it will be beneficial for the organization.*[184]

> *If we educate 100 men it is equal to educating one woman. On the one hand women are hard-working, and on the other hand they are not corrupt.*[185]

In this case, the reasons for altering the rules or institutional culture to allow more women to take on positions of authority do not concern their equal capacity for leadership, nor their right to compete as equals. Rather, the main reasons given are their perceived, sex-determined characteristics. This less transformative, less controversial efficiency approach allows an easier shift between sets of

institutional practices. In MOE this attitude was not frequently found, however, and this possibly results from a greater number of women in very senior positions (such as advisors to the minister). Indeed, the presence of these women was used in almost every interview in MOE as an indicator that "gender had been achieved" and that discrimination between men and women did not exist in the ministry.[186]

However, systems of male dominance (along with those of welfare provision and *khedmat/wasita*) extend far beyond institutional cultures in ministries. Indeed, these institutional cultures themselves are embedded within society and reflect social norms and practices in a much wider context. Any attempts to promote gender equality must contend not only with possible resistance to women in positions of authority within ministries, but a broader political terrain in which the legitimacy of women's roles in the public domain has been a site of contestation. Still, continuing with a focus on ministries as institutions and the predominant cultures existing within them, it is necessary now to look in more depth at the ways in which institutional reforms are currently being implemented in ministries, and to assess why their effect is minimal at present.

5.2   Institutional reforms (overlapping cultures?)

Throughout the ANDS, a number of mechanisms are identified as means through which to reform administrative institutions to increase productivity and efficiency. A number of these reforms are intended to address, correct or replace institutional cultures which currently exist, such as the three explored in the previous section. In this way, these reforms — part of the post-2001 state-building process — can be seen as yet another set of institutional cultures existing in parallel to those that are already established.[187] On the one

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184   Male respondent, MRRD. The assumption that women are somehow less corrupt than men is an international phenomenon and is discussed at length in AREU's previous issues paper on gender interests in parliament. Wordsworth, "A Matter of Interests," 31-32.

185   Male respondent, MOE.

186   Numerous respondents, male and female, MOE.

187   Deniz Kandiyoti, "Political fiction meets gender myth: post-conflict reconstruction, 'democratization' and women's rights," in *Feminisms in Development: Contradictions, Contestations and Challenges*, ed. Andrea Cornwall, Elizabeth Harrison and Ann Whitehead, (London and New York: Zed Books, 2007).

hand, six years is a relatively short time in which to expect significant institutional change. On the other hand, institutional reforms across all sectors have encountered and engendered considerable hindrances and have not been as successful as initially anticipated. Gender mainstreaming is merely one of many institutional reform initiatives in Afghanistan that are currently perceived as not functioning as expected.[188] This being the case, it is useful to assess three specific kinds of reform tools which have had direct effect on processes of gender mainstreaming to date — namely, PRR, positive discrimination and gender awareness-raising through workshops.

Priority Reform and Restructuring

The ANDS acclaims PRR as a principal method through which to improve the calibre of the civil service in Afghanistan.[189] It is in the process of being implemented in the majority of ministries, including all six of the case study ministries for this research. This process requires staff members to reapply for their positions in order to assess their capacity for specific posts. If deemed necessary, staff members are moved to other positions within the ministry to which their skills and abilities are thought to be more appropriately suited. In the long term, this initiative may well be beneficial for ministries currently experiencing a lack of human resources. At present however, ministries are struggling to accommodate the new changes. This was exemplified during data collection for this study (particularly in phase one), as many interviewees stated that they could not give detailed information as a result of having occupied their posts for only a short period of time.

In theory, then, PRR is a credible means of revamping a staff body to improve its efficacy and productivity. If those charged with the task of overseeing gender mainstreaming already have some experience in the field and are well qualified for their positions, the potential effect of PRR on

gender mainstreaming is significant: there would be a stronger likelihood of it being implemented effectively. With more competent staff, the need for international assistance for mainstreaming may well be reduced, restoring a focus on national ownership of the agenda. However, this makes a variety of assumptions, including that once in post, qualified, gender-sensitive staff would be *able* to promote mainstreaming against potential challenges posed by the institutional environment of the ministry. A second assumption is that these members of staff would indeed be willing to take on these challenges, given an ability to do so. Moreover, PRR is not the perfect solution that the ANDS portrays it to be.[190] Rather, as implied above (Section 4.1), it is a new set of "rules of the game" superimposed onto preexisting institutional systems, which have not disintegrated with the introduction of PRR.[191] For example, this might include using one's *wasita* as a means of securing employment in ministries.

Furthermore, women are generally at a distinct disadvantage in the PRR process, as it does nothing to combat systems of discrimination that already exist. When sitting exams to reapply for their jobs, for example, a good number of women are not successful and thus lose their positions. One international respondent working in one of the case study ministries describes this:

> *At the third level [of testing], all the women failed the tests and interviews, because systematic biases had prevented them from getting experience and the tests were all based on merit principles, but we must ask whose merit principles these were, and really they were all male.[192]*

As this quotation indicates, the question to ask is not whether potential candidates should be judged according to merit-based principles or not, but whether the principles themselves need to be changed in order to accommodate women. This

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188   Perspectives of various respondents, both national and international, in interviews.

189   I-ANDS, Volume 1, 35.

190   I-ANDS, Volume 1, 35.

191   Adam Pain, pers. comm.

192   Female international respondent

would be an example of the kind of transformative changes that Fodor suggests are necessary (but currently not being implemented) in her study of gender mainstreaming in the EU, referred to above.[193] It cannot be said, however, that nothing is being done to encourage women to apply for positions in ministries — indeed, to varying extents, all six ministries show visible efforts to promote measures of positive discrimination.

Positive discrimination

Positive discrimination here means the giving of special advantage or preference to disadvantaged groups, in this case women.[194] In a holistic sense, this can and should include comprehensive measures for ensuring that women and men are able to compete fairly. If women have fewer qualifications or less experience, training schemes should be available to ensure that they can perform to the same level of competence as their male colleagues.[195] Indeed, comprehensive positive discrimination measures can form a central component of internal aspects of gender mainstreaming (those dealing with institutional structures, processes and practices, for example).[196] In interviews, however, the use of the term "positive discrimination" was much more limited. It described the practice of "lowering the passing mark" for women candidates solely to increase numbers of female staff in ministries. According to respondents, ministries in which a need for more female staff has been acknowledged are currently implementing this limited practice of positive discrimination.

The arguments for using positive discrimination methods are well-founded in Afghanistan, where women have been systematically marginalised by successive political regimes in recent years.[197] There are very few educated women in the country as a whole[198]; many are concentrated in urban areas where they work for international agencies, earning higher salaries than the ministries could offer. As such, measures of positive discrimination, such as quotas, could be highly necessary to build contingents of women in ministries.

Women interviewed in phase one ministries overwhelmingly supported the institutionalization of basic positive discrimination practices (such as this lowering of expected standards) throughout the PRR process to assist female staff in their re-application for jobs. The following quotations reflect views of the majority of women interviewed in phase one on the subject of PRR:

> Yesterday we had interviews in my department for the promotion of female staff. Also one male member of staff applied for the position, he was actually my relative, my maternal cousin. I told him not to apply because I would only support women and not him. He went to the committee to complain about this and they sent me a letter asking why I would not put him forward for promotion. I said if you ask me to go to Karzai to explain this I would say this: how can we reach our target within the ministry for 38% of women if only 8% are now women and we do nothing about it?[199]

> I have discussed with the PRR committee about hiring female staff and I suggested that there should be positive discrimination for women because the level of discrimination is different between men and women. Women spent six years at home during the Taliban and we need positive discrimination until the capacity of women has increased.[200]

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193   Fodor, "Gender Mainstreaming," 11 .

194   For a more detailed exploration of positive discrimination measures in government, see Anne Phillips, *The Politics of Presence: The Political Representation of Gender, Ethnicity and Race*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

195   Such a comprehensive approach can be termed "affirmative action."

196   With thanks to Paula Kantor for contributing to this point.

197   There is a much wider debate on the advantages and disadvantages of positive discrimination/affirmative action policy which cannot be discussed at length here. Further discussion is given in Phillips, A., (1995), *The politics of presence: the political representation of gender, ethnicity, and race*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

198   UNIFEM employee, pers. comm.

199   Female respondent, MRRD.

200   Female respondent, MOWA.

Almost universally in the first three case study ministries, women interviewed supported some basic means of positive discrimination in the PRR process. They felt this would compensate for their disadvantage, relative to men, in terms of education and training. Some, as demonstrated in the quotations above, are actively implementing schemes through which women are given an advantage in PRR assessments.

However, the negative consequences of basic positive discrimination and its effect on a holistic approach to gender mainstreaming must also be considered. In spite of the fact that a pool of qualified women does exist, measures of positive discrimination sometimes involves the hiring of unqualified women. Men who perceive these women as such may resent them, believe them to be taking their positions, or pity them and treat them as second-class employees. Interestingly, in phase two ministries, respondents viewed positive discrimination techniques far more ambiguously, with many (men and women) drawing attention to the negative aspects of "lowering the pass-mark" for women:[201]

In Afghanistan also there are some exceptions made for women; for example reserving seats for women in Parliament is an exception made for women in Afghanistan…These reserved seats make women's status even lower than before because it looks like they cannot get seats by themselves.[202]

If we only think about work, and not relations or wasita, women would never be promoted from one position to another position and they would fail in the PRR process as well. According the statement of one of high level member of staff women have a 30 percent higher chance

than men in the PRR process, otherwise they could not pass that process.[203]

I believe that if a woman has the capacity, she should be selected for any position but she should not be selected just because she is a woman…I am absolutely against this positive discrimination.[204]

While some phase two respondents did agree with positive discrimination, in almost all cases, they carefully distinguished that this was only under the circumstances of male and female candidates gaining the same marks in examinations. One international respondent also described the potential consequences of adopting positive discrimination without caution:

There are a handful of… women who are competent but there are also a lot of women who have been promoted past their competencies, as there is a lot of tokenism in the ministry. Women have been advanced, they have achieved more rank on their shoulders but their jobs haven't changed. They are still making tea and going home early. Women are given special privileges and they are treated like children, they are given indulgences, they are not expected to work, and if they are not there then no one asks why, no one challenges them, they are treated like spoilt children. People see women in… uniforms but they are not contributing to the organisation.[205]

According to this respondent, perceptions of working women will change only when women are able to prove their worth. This in itself is only likely to happen when there is a critical mass of qualified women employed in the ministries. As such, the familiar trade-off exists between the hiring of women *en masse* and the hiring of those specifically qualified for their particular positions.

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201   It is unclear exactly why more respondents in phase two held negative opinions concerning measures of positive discrimination, but reasons could include the length of time between phase one and phase two interviews (6-8 months), during which time the PRR process was either finished or coming to an end and respondents could have had a better idea by this time of the potential problems with positive discrimination.

202   Female respondent, MOE.

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203   Male respondent, MOJ.

204   Female respondent, MOJ.

205   Female international respondent.

Measures of positive discrimination can be detrimental to perceptions of women working, and can damage — rather than strengthen women's reputations — in the ministries. If, as the government's Gender Mainstreaming Policy states, a required component of gender mainstreaming is "the actual participation and leadership of women,"[206] positive discrimination could significantly affect its implementation by emphasising perceptions of a staff-group unfit for leadership positions. The following statement from a male respondent in MOJ highlights his strong opinions about the capabilities of his female colleagues:

> *In my personal opinion I am observing that the role of women is not very significant. I think women themselves are to blame for this. Due to this reason their roles are simple, for example we have a women's association but…their meetings are very limited and useless. Women have lots of problems in terms of the working environment, for example women cannot go to the provinces, they do not like working for the purchasing department, they do not like working in the finance section, they cannot make plans. They cannot do lots of work in MOJ.[207]*

There is a danger that if only the *recruitment* of women is emphasised, this recruitment and the sense of "doing gender" by increasing numbers of women alone will replace the far more holistic goal of gender equality. In many interviews, respondents seemed to imply that their ministry was "doing gender" by trying to hire a certain percentage of women. This was particularly the case in the MOIA, where very few women are employed in comparison with numbers of male staff,[208] and respondents often emphasised a commitment to the hiring of significant numbers of female staff.

Another matter is how they will accommodate these women once they are employed, even, for example, just in terms of physical adjustments in the workplace for substantially more staff. Over the course of this study, it became clear that ministries are already struggling to provide facilities for the limited numbers of women working in them. MOIA, for instance, has only one female bathroom a significant distance from the main ministry building. Perhaps of greater concern than the physical accommodation of female staff is the question of how women will be trained and integrated into the ministries in a professional capacity. It appears that the complexities accompanying the basic premise of positive discrimination have not been wholly considered.

There are certain inadequacies with suggested policies promoting positive discrimination. For example, NAPWA states that the security sector should be comprised of 30 percent women in 15 years' time.[209] The document states such a high target for a reason: if ambitious goals are set, more effort is likely to be put into achieving them, and they might be halfway achieved.[210] However, there is a distinction between ambitious and unrealistic. It could also be the case that a continual failure to meet high targets can undermine a programme and lead to the depletion of motivation for those implementing it. One international respondent commented that the police force in Britain has existed in some form for centuries, and yet it is only in the last 35 years that women have been accepted within it.[211] This respondent went on to explain in an interview that women presently comprise approximately 23 percent of the British police force — a level which has taken 35 years to

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206   GOA, "Gender Mainstreaming Policy," in NAPWA, Annex A, 103.

207   Male respondent, MOJ.

208   Figures have been cited at approximately 220-300 women of around 67,000 members of the police force (this is not including other staff within the MOIA) by different national and international respondents during this study. In 2006, estimates were given at 63,000 for the total number of police, of whom only 180 were women. Andrew Wilder, *Cops or Robbers? The Struggle to Reform the Afghan National Police*, (Kabul: AREU, 2007).

209   NAPWA, 26. NAPWA suggests that this is an ideal target, and that if the country can achieve a 20 percent increase in the number of women involved in security sector service delivery after 10 years, it will be on its way to achieving 30 percent in 15 years (p. 26). The benchmark is still, however, unattainably high.

210   Female international respondent.

211   Female international respondent. It is interesting that this respondent made reference to this point, and her doing so highlights the fact that individual internationals are all too aware of the shortcomings of policy recommendations in the I-ANDS and NAPWA. Such shortcomings appear to be a problem with the system, and not so much with individual players within it.

attain, and yet still is far from ideal.[212] While one would assume that Afghanistan will not follow the same path to gender equitable policing as the UK, this comparison nonetheless indicates the level of resistance to change that has been experienced in other contexts. It is an oversight not to insist that the ministries prepare to meet such targets through the improvement of their institutional structure, facilities and training mechanisms to accommodate this incoming staff body. It is unlikely, however, that women who are brought in to the ministry through positive discrimination and without adequate training will contribute substantively to the gender mainstreaming agenda.

This paper contends, then, that measures of positive discrimination are, firstly, not enough to combat gender inequalities. Secondly, they can be detrimental to the mainstreaming agenda if not combined with clear policies on how ministries intend to provide equal opportunities for their female staff. A focus on a holistic approach — substantive gender mainstreaming as opposed to basic positive discrimination purely to increase numbers of women in ministries — would involve a more comprehensive rendering of all systems, policies, programmes and services gender sensitive. This, indeed, is the ultimate aim of many technical advisors working on gender in the ministries studied and can be seen as an ideal towards which efforts can be channelled. However, the reality in ministries at present is that a very basic, tokenistic form of positive discrimination is being employed — namely, the hiring of women *en masse* whose qualifications do not necessarily meet minimum requirements. This is a start and the recognition of the need for female staff members must be encouraged; it cannot be assumed, though, that mainstreaming is being implemented in this way alone. Further, it is evident that this kind of basic positive discrimination is not combating perceived systems of gendered hierarchies in ministries. Indeed, it can serve to enhance these systems, as demonstrated earlier in this section.

Workshops

A final tool for administrative reform used frequently to promote gender mainstreaming within ministries, by national and international gender proponents alike, is that of gender training workshops (also called trainings, "awareness raisings" or seminars). Given that this capacity building technique is so widely used, it is presumably considered effective by those choosing to provide these workshops. However, a number of problems occur with this approach, such as the vague language with which they are described and the "quick-fix" mentality that workshops tend to emphasise.

> When referring to gender workshops, respondents — both those who had participated in and facilitated them — rarely gave details regarding their content or format. The following quotations are representative of a general lack of specific detail given in interviews:

> We need to give awareness about the law and rights of women to all people and we can do that through training and workshops.[213]

> We will have short-term seminars to raise awareness and we should try to spread gender through the ministry in this way.[214] (male respondent, MOIA)

Descriptions of workshops in general in interview data often bear this lack of detail, but respondents show particular vagueness when describing gender workshops. This likely results from the abstractness of gender as a concept. This ambiguity appears to affect both internationally and nationally planned training events. In one meeting, in which a gender workshop was being planned in MOPH, a series of "buzzwords" were used, such as "brainstorming," "snow-balling," and "group-work." Nothing was said, however, about what these are, why these particular techniques had been chosen, or what

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212   Female international respondent.

213   Male respondent, MOWA.

214   Male respondent, MOIA.

outcomes were expected.[215] It is apparent that these terms have been transferred from international workshops in which such jargon is commonplace. If people cannot give solid accounts of the ways in which participants are expected to benefit from gender workshops, it is not surprising that limited funding is allocated to them (Section 4.2).

A further problem with workshops is that they are often cosmetic, quick-fix solutions. While they are relatively easy to implement, many respondents criticised workshops and their questionable outcomes:

If [MOWA] combines training with other mechanisms and has a history or background of trainings, then the workshops will be fine, but if they are one-off events then they won't do anything. This is the same for the gender trainings in the [other] ministries. They need a continuous development programme and human resources.[216]

Today there is a one-day workshop from USAID and they invited all of our provincial staff just for one day from far places. In my opinion one-day workshops pass for Afghan people like the wind blows, they are gone very quickly, and no-one can learn anything because they pass very fast... There are some traders who export unripe bananas from Pakistan. They bring unripe bananas here and then for two nights they put some carbon on them, and after this time they ripen. However although they look ripe they do not have any taste or quality like the naturally ripened bananas have. People are also like these unripe bananas and in the course of a one-day workshop donors want to give them awareness and send them back to their province, but the knowledge they get from the workshops will not have any quality.[217]

Many respondents in both phases disparaged national and international efforts to provide gender training

in the form of workshops.[218] The ambitious nature of attempting to train people in gender sensitivity in a short time was strongly critiqued. The practice of raising awareness through workshops perpetuates the notion that gender can be "done" in a series of short sessions and that it is not something that needs to be considered from a long-term perspective. Furthermore, the overwhelmingly widespread use of workshops to raise awareness implies that a lack of awareness, or ignorance, about gender is the root cause of resistance against it. This approach does not adequately consider vested political interests, which may run deeper than an unfamiliarity with gender terminology. It assumes that resistance to gender equality may be extinguished by the mere giving of information.

It is necessary to question, then, the potential efficacy of administrative reform processes in improving current attitudes towards gender equity within accepted institutional cultures. It can be argued that neither PRR nor positive discrimination — nor gender workshops, in the ways that they are currently functioning — can significantly promote a gender-sensitive approach to policymaking in ministries. These form part of another set of institutional cultures which are being imposed on ministries, creating parallel systems which rarely affect one another.[219] The potential for change and acceptance of a substantive gender mainstreaming agenda, however, could be increased by certain actions. These reform tools could be combined with a commitment to the comprehensive training of female staff and to the financial provision in ministry budgets to the increasing of gender awareness, It will be necessary to conduct further assessments of institutional reforms promoting gender mainstreaming at a later date — perhaps after two or three years — as follow-up to this limited evaluation of their current impact. This impact, however, will not be brought about solely through technical reform measures but also, crucially, with the broad-based political will to promote equality.

215   Research team observation notes, MOPH.

216   Male respondent. MRRD.

217   Male respondent, MOWA.

218   This attitude towards workshops was also found to be prevalent among members of parliament, for whom many such training events have been organised. Wordsworth, "A Matter of Interests," 31-32.

219   Deniz Kandiyoti, "Political fiction meets gender myth," 198.

5.3   Discussion: Political will (a passive approach to mainstreaming?)

The issue of political will has been mentioned throughout this paper. It is an essential component to the furthering of gender mainstreaming in any given context, notwithstanding technical mechanisms being implemented or institutional contexts considered. Political will, in and of itself, implies a sustained, active drive to achieve a particular goal.[220] If the political will exists to promote a particular agenda within government, for example, this indicates that the agenda has accumulated enough strong support to be promoted and established. This study argues, however, that in Afghanistan, political will to support gender mainstreaming is presently more passive than a conventional definition of political will implies. "Passive political will" here describes an attitude that concedes to "other" actors establishing mechanisms for promoting gender issues. It allows integrational approaches to be taken but does not take an active role in promoting them, nor does it consider these issues a priority.

Goetz has argued that not only the nature of the State and its bureaucratic system will effect successful policy change for women's empowerment within a given country. She states that the strength of advocacy for gender equality within civil society and the ways in which the political system functions are vital factors.[221] It is beyond the remit of this paper to discuss these latter two factors in detail. It can be mentioned, though, that the disconnect in Afghanistan between civil society organisations and the legislative process in Parliament contribute to the ways in which active political will to promote this agenda in general is somewhat lacking. There is also a lack of provisions within existing political parties for the furthering of ideology-based platforms such

as gender equality.[222] Furthermore, while it could be argued that successful policy change for gender equality can only be brought about from within a nation state, international influence in Afghanistan, as argued above, is considerable. To take hold, at least in the short term, gender mainstreaming will also require active commitment on the part of international donors and the continued assistance of technical advisors.

This paper now discusses a certain passivity toward mainstreaming in Afghanistan that is evident in prevailing perspectives (both within line ministries and among influential donor circles). At present, mainstreaming appears to be an integrational, as opposed to transformative, project.

Political will within ministries: lack of resistance, absence of activity?

In spite of the potential limitations on the progress of gender mainstreaming, there is a general lack of resistance to the promotion of gender issues in ministries among staff at all levels, which should not be readily discounted. The presence of a degree of political will to see gender mainstreaming taking place was evident in the statements collected in both phases from high-ranking (for example, deputy ministers), mid-level (heads of department) and lower-level staff. This was noted in particular in two key areas — those of a general enthusiasm for the introduction and strengthening of gender mechanisms, such as units, and the relationship between gender and Islam.

Criticism of established gender mechanisms or women's *shuras* in ministries is commonplace among other members of staff not working on gender issues. Some of this criticism is warranted, and possibly demonstrates a desire to see gender issues promoted more substantively in ministries, as the effectiveness of these mechanisms is under criticism rather than their mandate. In the data, members of ministry staff often analyzed the work and reach of gender mechanisms and assessed how they might be more effective in terms of their influence and authority. In ministries where

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220   Oxfam GB, "Making It Happen: Political Will for Gender Equality in Education" *Policy Insights*, Education and Gender Equality Series, no. 5 (2005). http://www.oxfam.org.uk/what_we_do/issues/education/downloads/edPaper5.pdf , accessed 20 July 2008.

221   Goetz, "No Shortcuts to Power."

222   Wordsworth, "A Matter of Interests," 31-32.

gender units did not already exist, there was a general enthusiasm for their being set up. These are undoubtedly factors which could facilitate the implementation of (and certainly would not hinder) gender mainstreaming in ministries. Admittedly, however, not all respondents were able to give constructive criticism, and few were able to expand on what the TOR of a gender unit, for example, should comprise. Nevertheless, respondents demonstrated a lack of resistance to first, gender mechanisms being established, and second, their work being influential in any given ministry. This was considered altogether encouraging to the prospect of gender mainstreaming initiatives being implemented and indicated, to a certain extent, the political will to accept them.

It has been noted above that political will within ministries will reflect the will of the general socio-political context within which any given ministry is situated. As an institution, neither an individual ministry nor the Afghan administration as a whole can isolate itself from the overarching political landscape of which it is a part. As Goetz' argument puts forward, one of three key factors in determining the success of policy change promoting gender equality is the nature of civil society and gender advocacy efforts within it.[223] While a detailed assessment of the socio-political context of Afghanistan and the nature of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) within it is beyond the scope of this paper, it is nonetheless necessary to consider one particular and fundamental element of that social context — that of Islam. National political will in Afghanistan is inherently linked with religious principles and the question of the acceptability of gender mainstreaming is often set, in this case, within Islam. Interestingly, over 60 percent of respondents in ministries talked about gender issues within this framework. No singular perspective was found on how the two precisely coincide, but it was the subject of considerable debate, as demonstrated in the following quotations:

In fact gender is a very good word, Islam accepts it. We have verses of Quran and Hadis that ratify gender equity, but people both inside and

outside the ministry have a negative idea about gender. They are against gender because they think it means complete freedom and mixing of men and women everywhere and all the time. I believe that gender does not mean this; it does not mean total freedom in this way. I am sure you internationals do not think this either. If the meaning is clarified for the people, then they will accept it. It is not a strange term and it is not against our religion.[224]

If...we do not use the name of gender, this will be better. It will not have a negative effect but a positive one. For example in Islam it says that education is necessary for men and women, but gender is not mentioned. We should just follow what is said in the Quran.[225]

Gender is an Italian term, and it does not have a difficult definition, as it means the equal rights between men and women in the society. We have the equivalent of this in Islam, and it is called social justice. This is gender, and now we want to implement this in our work and policy.[226]

As these quotations demonstrate, Islam is often considered the appropriate frame of reference for a discussion of gender issues.[227] While respondents rarely agreed on how gender issues related to Islamic principles, both men and women referred to the Quran as a means to justify a focus on gender issues, even if the term "gender" was not specifically used. It is not clear exactly what every respondent meant by these gender issues, but if expanded upon, they often included equal rights to education, rights to choose a marriage partner and the necessity of treating women with respect. Respondents across all ministries also commonly claimed that those who did not heed principles of gender equality (usually people living in rural areas) were not practicing Islam "correctly." Often,

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223   Goetz, "No Shortcuts to Power."

224   Male respondent, MOIA.

225   Female respondent, MRRD

226   Male respondent, MOWA.

227   With thanks to Deniz Kandiyoti for suggesting this point.

> **Box 5: Passive political will — an international issue**
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> *[The US has contributed] $2 billion to police reform alone. A huge amount has been spent on policing, and almost none of the main funds for policing have been spent on gender...The international community sees gender as a frill.*
>
> — International female respondent
>
> *In the first, second and third years there was a lot of talk about gender, and they wanted to support the gender unit, but now it is limited. I don't know why the donors are not talking about it so much any more. Gender is a cross-cutting issue but there is no direct support – the support comes through the whole programme.*
>
> — Male respondent, MRRD
>
> *These are the first drafts of the sectoral strategies, and we still have 1-2 more months for more consultations and so there is quite a lot of time to consider gender and other cross-cutting issues later on. We have two months to discuss other topics and in the third month we will again focus on the gender-related issues.*
>
> — Quotation taken from field notes, ANDS/MOWA meeting

the caveat of "if gender issues comply with Islamic principles, we can accept them" was given. By no means, though, is this an outright rejection of the concern for gender equality. Still, it can be seen that any attempts to promote gender mainstreaming will need to be put forward within an Islamic framework, given that gender issues are evidently considered by the majority of respondents to be enmeshed with religious principles in Afghanistan. The key finding from the data here is that respondents do not see gender equality and mainstreaming initiatives as being against these religious principles, and thus the foundations for political will to support them are already partially in place.

Many agencies working on gender mainstreaming in Afghanistan are already working from this principle. For example, GTZ-GM has organised a seminar in India for gender unit staff and FSRs, dedicated entirely to the subject of gender and Islam. Indeed, as one respondent reported, most of the lectures on the course ended by 5pm, but this particular one lasted well into the night.[228] UNIFEM and UNDP currently have plans to work with the Ministry of Haj, and The Asia Foundation's gender programme is working at the community level on gender from an Islamic perspective.[229] As such, some international actors can be seen to be actively seeking engagement with Afghanistan's prevailing Islamic discourse. It is argued here that if mainstreaming efforts strive to be even vaguely transformative, they must engage productively with current Islamic thinking in Afghanistan.

Again referring to Fodor's work, it can be reiterated that without the crucial ingredient of national political will, top-down efforts to mainstream gender from external agents will remain superficial and tokenistic.[230] However, this assumes that national political will is of an active nature. While

228   Male respondent, MOF.

229   Information taken from interviews and review comments on this paper.

230   Fodor, "Gender Mainstreaming, 13.

the above examples demonstrate to some extent a level of existing political will, they nevertheless imply a passive acceptance rather than active championing. In Afghanistan, this passive support of gender equality initiatives appears to be commonplace among national perspectives. Examples of this kind of approach to gender equality — and to mainstreaming more specifically — from these perspectives: that is, from those working at all levels in ministries - have been identified or reported throughout the two phases of this study, some of which are given in Box 5.

These quotations illustrate a concern with priorities — it is clear from the data collected in this study that gender issues are not considered paramount compared to other issues, such as security, counter-narcotics or healthcare. When the country is facing a number of grave concerns that require immediate attention, this is unsurprising. But, the ways in which gender inequalities pervade these sectors was not often reported by national respondents. When, as discussed earlier in the paper, the actual beneficiaries of gender mainstreaming remain (understandably) unclear to the majority of ministerial staff, it is unsurprising that this agenda is not prioritised over more tangible causes.

A final point to consider in this section is the importance of influential individuals. While the active political will of ministry staff as discussed above is an important prerequisite for mainstreaming initiatives to take hold, certain members of ministry staff in senior positions are likely to be more influential than others. Essentially, the outcome of these initiatives will depend on levels of active political will from national government authorities. The necessity of substantive commitment and

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Box 6: Passive political will: a national perspective

The government is like the compound of a building and first the problems of this building should be solved and then they can work on other things…Now, gender, democracy and free trade will take a long time to be implemented in the country, otherwise we will face the situation that we faced under the communists, as the context was not ready for them to practice their opinions and notions…The same is true of gender issues. Now the government is paying attention to less important issues like gender when it should be focusing on security.

— Male respondent, MCN

We work on health, so we can only take gender into account lightly…if we focus too much on [gender] then our health work would remain undone, and so I don't think we can do more on this.

— Female respondent, MOWA

Among the cross-cutting issues gender is not given as much emphasis as the other cross-cutting issues, for example counter-narcotics. It is not the least emphasised but it is certainly not the most. This really matters, because if high level people pushed the gender agenda then it would be successful.

— Male respondent, MRRD

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support from members of the leadership within ministries and other government entities cannot be underestimated.

International political will: passivity reiterated?

The notion that without national political will, external efforts to impose gender mainstreaming will remain fruitless, is problematic because it presupposes that these external efforts are in themselves actively promoting a gender agenda. While there does not seem to be active resistance to gender issues being raised in the development and state-building arena in Afghanistan, it appears to have lost some of the prominence it was given at Bonn. The fact that the gender equality agenda has been allowed into the structure of the ANDS is

considered an achievement in itself. As discussed in Section 2.2, however, there are many problems with the document from a gender perspective and active political will to resolve these on the part of the IFIs and prominent bilateral donors seems to be somewhat lacking (Box 6). With quantifiable benchmarks achieved, such as the establishment of a 27 percent quota for women in the Wolesi Jirga and a MOWA, along with the inclusion of NAPWA in the ANDS, gender issues seem to have been made a low priority for international donors.

This is not only an issue of a lack of commitment on the part of policymakers, however. When considering the passive nature of international political will, it is also necessary to consider the diverse collection of actors contained within the umbrella of the international community. As has been witnessed throughout the course of this study, many international actors within organisations such as UNIFEM, GTZ-GM, JICA, UNDP and others have been extremely active in promoting gender issues among high-level bilateral and multilateral donors.[231] However, these actors do not always have the capacity or influence required to affect high-level decisions on funding for gender initiatives from key donors such as the US, EU and IFIs. Thus their own activity remains unable to penetrate mainstream donor agendas. As its name would suggest, active political will is inherently political, and it could further be argued that the more active it becomes, the more political its scope. For this reason alone, it is possible to see why apparently nonpolitical donors such as IFIs choose to remain distant from this kind of activity. While they tend not to resist integrational gender initiatives, it explains why they maintain a passive *stance* on anything vaguely transformative.

Active political will involves visibly supporting and prioritising gender concerns at high levels. At present, however, the distinct lack of active political will to promote gender mainstreaming by both national ministry staff and international donors is contributing to the stasis in which the strategy now stands. While technical concerns and institutional contexts affect the ways gender mainstreaming plays out in ministries, the fundamental key to its efficacy is to secure the active commitment of influential national and international actors. This is not to say, however, that further thought or effort into the improvement of technical gender mechanisms or the detailed analysis of institutional contexts is unwarranted. Indeed, attention to these aspects of ministerial structure and culture may well affect or encourage the cultivation of active political will among influential ministry authorities.

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231   Field notes, ANDS donor coordination meetings.

6.   Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Conclusions

Gender mainstreaming has been established within key national policy documents as the Afghan government's chosen strategy for increasing gender equality. In this way, it is put forward as a central mechanism in the GoA's commitment to attain international benchmarks on gender and development.

Mainstreaming has been taken up globally as a recommended tool for the achievement of these goals, and provides an important potential strategy to do so in Afghanistan. However, as imported policy, gender mainstreaming has been added to the other assorted prescriptions for the rebuilding of the post-war state, and as yet the means through which it could be implemented substantively have not become clear. The purpose of this study has been to assess the current hindrances to mainstreaming in Afghan ministries, and suggest ways in which these barriers could be overcome.

There is yet to be found a direct translation in Dari or Pashto for the term "gender," and a considerable degree of confusion exists as to its meaning. However, while technical familiarity with gender terminology was not prevalent among ministry staff, neither was a sense of resistance towards the term or concept of gender.

Technical factors are currently affecting the efficacy of gender mainstreaming initiatives in ministries. Mechanisms such as gender units, gender working groups and focal points are limited in terms of their relative vertical and horizontal influence over policy decisions through their marginal positions in ministry structures, and in terms of resources. It is found however that, with a combined gender working group + 1 model, both vertical and horizontal influence could be attained. Significant emphasis, however, would need to be placed on the coordination between these two mechanisms in each ministry. While interministerial

mechanisms do exist to promote mainstreaming more broadly in the civil service, these are for the most part newly established and currently limited in similar ways to mechanisms in ministries. Even if significant technical and structural changes are made to existing gender mechanisms and their ministerial positioning, however, there is also a need to consider the institutional contexts in which they are situated.

Institutional environments in ministries consist of a variety of overlapping and often parallel institutional cultures in which differing rules apply. Some examples of existing institutional cultures, such as welfare expectations, *khedmat/wasita* and perceptions of gendered hierarchies could be potentially detrimental to the mainstreaming agenda. Furthermore, efforts to reform institutions in Afghanistan are not always able to penetrate or replace existing cultures, even if these reform measures themselves could truly be considered gender sensitive.

A key finding from this research has been the way in which respondents have referred to gender and gender mainstreaming within an Islamic discourse. This is significant in that it demonstrates to some extent the *potential* broad-based political will to promote gender issues within an Islamic framework. Indeed, it is argued in this paper that attempts to promote gender mainstreaming outside of such a framework will remain integrational, and not tranformative, due to an unwillingness to confront and incorporate prevailing socio-religious norms. Of course, *how* this could be done is a matter for debate, but some actors within the international community working on gender issues in Afghanistan have begun to adopt this approach. It remains to be seen how effective this strategy will prove.

The potential emergence of political will to support gender equality, however, does not automatically translate into the *active* political will necessary now to promote gender mainstreaming. Indeed, the lack of activity on the part of both international

donors and influential national actors contributes to a stasis against which mainstreaming efforts have been trying to move forward. There is certainly space for change in the improvement and establishment of technical mechanisms in ministries and, further, in institutional reforms. The goal of any improvements made in these two sectors, though, must be the attainment of active political will from influential figures both in the national and international spheres. Without this, the development and efficacy of these mechanisms and cultures will remain all but integrational lip-service in policy documents such as the ANDS.

Policy recommendations

To more effectively implement gender mainstreaming, this paper recommends the following to the Government of Afghanistan (GoA), to individual line ministries and to international actors:

- National policy on gender **Afghanistan National Development Strategy —** Future reviews of the ANDS must further clarify its stance on promoting both gender equality and the role of women in the public sector. Provisions for gender budgeting (a tool used to assess the gendered impacts of government expenditure) should be more comprehensively included in ANDS budgeting processes, particularly in sector strategies. Gender benchmarks in the ANDS need to be further clarified and their meanings made more explicit. These should be accompanied by clear implementation strategies.

- **Gender-specific policy documents** — Current documents include the NAPWA, ANDS Gender Equity Cross Cutting Strategy and specific sections of the ANDS final document. The demands for transformative social change in gender relations in these documents are presently too expansive. While their overarching vision is certainly grounded in the need to promote gender equality in Afghanistan, the un-focused prescriptions they contain detract from targeted, implementable strategies that might be put in place. Further, few suggestions deal

with how gender-sensitive policies might be monitored. These strategies must be refocused during the review process to take place a year after their ratification.

Technical factors

The term "technical factors" is used in this paper to refer to structural and programmatic issues that relate to gender mainstreaming in ministries. These include the way in which gender mechanisms (such as gender units, gender working groups, gender advisors and women's shuras) function and relate to one another. Key issues here are these mechanisms' positions in ministry *tashkils*, and the need for vertical connections to senior figures as well as horizontal (operational) influence across all ministry departments.

The following recommendations relate to these areas:

Gender units and women's shuras

Both units and *shuras* have the potential to be useful in furthering gender equality in ministries in different ways. However, their mandates need to be clarified and separated from one another in practice, not just on paper. Both kinds of mechanisms require positions in *tashkils* in order to potentially increase their influence in ministries. Giving these mechanisms official positions within a ministry's organisational structure would demonstrate upper-level support for gender issues. These positions need to be strategically chosen according to individual ministry *tashkils* and be distinguishable from each other. They need to be both vertically and horizontally influential, but also relevant to the terms of reference of each mechanism. For example, a women's *shura* could be established within the human resources department of a ministry and the gender unit placed under policy and planning. A system for detailed monitoring and evaluation of the work and progress of these units will need to be established alongside them.

Working Groups

Interdepartmental working groups have the potential to significantly strengthen the mainstreaming

agenda operationally within ministries. They, however, rarely have vertical influence within ministries due to a lack of position within ministerial *tashkils* and corresponding absence of official high-level support. As such, they have little policy-making authority. A working group + 1 model should be encouraged by creating working groups to exist alongside vertically influential mechanisms (such as a well-placed gender unit or influential gender advisor). Once established, the coordination between a working group and a suitable support mechanism in any given ministry should receive considerable attention. This model provides the flexibility necessary to adapt to the significantly different structures of individual ministries.

Interministerial mechanisms

Respondents working within the NGMS currently view it as a coordinating body for gender mainstreaming efforts across ministries. This paper contends that it has the potential to be effective as such. Further, it should form the central core of governmental policy and planning on gender issues. To do this, it will need to become established as a recognised body within national government, whether within the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA) or preferably in a more influential location such as the Presidential Office. It must be considered the one mechanism to which all agencies working on gender policy, national and international, could be effectively held accountable. The NGMS has the potential to strengthen MOWA's role in supporting mainstreaming in other ministries.

Focal points are not functioning effectively at present and provide little more than a largely redundant gender mechanism to add to the list. With a more clearly articulated mandate and a greater sense of accountability to the base ministry, they could potentially be more effective, but at present focal points remain nominal in their contribution to gender mainstreaming and should be discontinued.

The Gender Budgeting Unit in the MOF will be a key tool in encouraging other ministries to mainstream gender into policies and programmes, but it needs to be established under the MOF budgeting department in order to have greater reach and influence. Furthermore, the processes through which ministries obtain funds for gender-related programmes should be clarified and widely communicated to those preparing budget forms for the MOF.

Interdepartmental mechanisms in ministries have the potential to be effective, provided that they have strong connections to senior policy makers within the ministry structure and that their relationships to existing mechanisms, such as gender units, are clarified.

Technical advisors

Additional, much-improved coordination of the work of technical advisors will be fundamental as a means to promote and generate support for gender mainstreaming at the donor level. It should, however, be clearly emphasised that their presence is not financially or operationally sustainable. A strengthened focus on capacity-building is necessary to promote the longevity of mainstreaming initiatives. Mainstreaming will continue to be seen as an international appendage to the Afghan administration until sufficient capacity and political will has been generated within ministries themselves.

Institutional factors

Institutional attitudes

It should not be assumed that attitudes of ministry staff towards gender equality are wholly negative. While a culture of male priority and dominance exists, there is a recognised need to emphasise women's public roles.

Through this study, it also becomes clear that attempts to promote gender mainstreaming will need to be put forward within an Islamic framework, given that gender issues are considered by the majority of respondents to be inseparable from religious principles. Without engaging in an Afghan-Islamic discourse, gender mainstreaming attempts will remain incremental and lose any chance of pushing a transformative agenda. Efforts to explore gender issues using this approach have

lready been initiated by agencies such as GTZ-GM[232] and UNIFEM.[233]

"Women's problems"

It is necessary to dissect the notion of "women's problems," a blanket phrase used frequently by respondents. This could help avoid the blurring of gender equality with welfare concerns. These tend to strengthen stereotypes of female staff as a needy, marginalised group of people who should be celebrated once a year on International Women's Day. Whether a focus on women only (as opposed to gender mainstreaming) is considered appropriate or not, associating women with welfare stereotypes is not conducive to the furthering of a rights-based agenda. It is recommended that discussion groups within ministries, perhaps jointly facilitated by a gender mechanism and HR department, are formed to identify these problems, explore them further and seek to adequately address them. This participatory process by itself could be empowering to those taking part.

Strengthening of institutions

The promotion of gender mainstreaming depends on the existence of fully-operational governmental institutions — a prerequisite that is lacking in Afghanistan's post-conflict context. If the GoA and international actors are indeed committed to the successful promotion of gender mainstreaming, a greater financial, technical and political commitment to strengthen institutions such as line ministries will be necessary. Furthermore, the processes through which this strengthening takes place need to be re-assessed, with greater emphasis on capacity-building of national staff.

Positive discrimination

Measures of positive discrimination currently employed in Afghanistan are not adequate to combat gender inequalities. These measures could be — and have been — detrimental to the

mainstreaming agenda when not combined with clear policies on how ministries should provide equal opportunities for their female staff. Rather than basic positive discrimination purely to increase numbers of women, a holistic approach embodied in a substantive mainstreaming agenda is necessary. For example, all systems, policies, programmes and services should be made gender sensitive in a more comprehensive manner.

Workshops

The practice of raising awareness through workshops perpetuates the notions that: gender can be "done" in a series of short sessions; and resistance that might be found stems from ignorance rather than underlying institutional cultures. Furthermore, since gender is an abstract concept, it cannot easily be applied to the work and attitudes of ministry staff. If workshops must still be used as a method, they should not be specifically focused on gender. Instead, gender issues should be integrated into other training courses for ministry staff (such as in management, leadership, team-building) with practical suggestions on how to approach these subjects in a gender-sensitive manner.

Active political will

Technical provisions for gender mainstreaming and reforms to institutional cultures will remain ineffective without harnessing the active political will of influential champions of gender issues. A concerted effort should be made to gain the political support of both national and international senior authorities for the promotion of a substantive gender equality agenda. This could involve further lobbying of members of Parliament, civil society organisations and key international donors to strengthen support for gender equality in government policy and programmes. Finally and fundamentally, it is the responsibility of the GoA, and of its leaders in particular, to ensure that its written commitment in the GoA Gender Mainstreaming Policy to promote gender equality is supported by its activities and practices.

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232   This is the acronym for the German Agency for Technical Cooperation, Gender Mainstreaming project.

233   GTZ-GM's efforts involve presenting seminars on gender and Islam. UNIFEM has plans to work with the Ministry of Haj and Religious Affairs.

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