"Democracy is a Club and Women are Not Invited": The Sexual Politics of Legitimacy, Civil Society and Women’s Collective Agency in Afghanistan

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According to Kardam (2004), owing to the women’s movement, there is now a “global gender regime” with set international conventions, norms and frameworks as guidelines to achieve gender equality. However, whilst both states and civil society organisations (CSO) claim to promote common good (Atack, 1999) the question remains as to how effective have CSOs been to implement gender equality projects and initiatives at the ground level, especially when the legitimacy of women and CSOs’ political identity and collective agency have long been contested and marginalised (Goetz, 2006; Moghaddam, 2006)?

In recent years, with the emerging global challenges such as climate change with the attending natural disasters, outbreaks of pandemics, the increase of civil and ethnic conflict as well as the rise of militant terrorist groups, these problems are no longer seen as only within the lens of aid and humanitarian assistance, but tied up with the discourse of human security (Jacoby and James, 2009). To be precise, the politicisation of humanitarian aid is not a new phenomenon, and CSOs – both international and local organisations – have had to make decisions on the level of engagement with donors. The challenge, however, is that through the process of militarisation of aid agencies, women’s issues and interests are either seconded or instrumentalised as resource-poor CSOs compete with each other as well as government agencies for funding from foreign donors (Moghaddam, 2006).

While it is commonly perceived that feminists’ struggle for women’s human rights and issues can be best realised through civil society, CSOs themselves are not immune to prevailing socio-political norms and practices, including those which support gender inequality (Goetz, 1997).

Drawing on my field research in Afghanistan, this paper will explore the commonality between women’s rights activists’ struggle for women as a political collective to be recognised and accounted for, with CSOs’ challenge in meeting public expectations of “delivering” the common good, whilst negotiating the complex terrain of donor interests within an increasingly militarised and marketised environment. In addition, the tension between CSOs replicating gendered norms and values which run contrary to feminists’ promotion of equality will also be discussed, where some CSOs in Afghanistan have taken the “just add women and stir” approach, adding female workers and aid recipients to programs only to attract donor interests and funding. While there is tension, in comparing the shared interests and conflicts between the two groups, there are also opportunities for both sides to engage in dialogues and strategic alliances, one of these opportunity is to engage with men – often regarded as gatekeepers and retarding the progress of women in development context.

The issue of how CSOs affect local communities and recipients’ perception of gender relations – either fostering support for women’s greater participation or reactionary backlash – will be analysed from a critical feminist perspective on the construction of a specific masculine identity in post-conflict situations which is predicated upon the social control of women as way to restore male dominance (Hamber, 2007; Wyrod, 2008). The focus on men’s resistance or support to gender equality initiatives is thus crucial in relation to the alliance between women’s activists and CSOs, as well as effectiveness of CSOs’ effort to promote women’s human rights in the context of Afghanistan, since it is only by questioning historical and socio-political context of gender relations and engaging with men and boys as active supporters that both CSOs and feminists’ goal of achieving gender equality can be implemented in a meaningful and sustainable manner.
Reference:


