



**IDS WORKING PAPER**

Volume **2011** No **387**

**Afghan Values or Women's  
Rights? Gendered Narratives  
about Continuity and Change  
in Urban Afghanistan**

Naila Kabeer, Ayesha Khan and Naysan Adlparvar  
December 2011



**pathways**  
of women's  
empowerment



**Institute of  
Development Studies**

Afghan Values or Women's Rights? Gendered Narratives about Continuity and Change in Urban Afghanistan  
Naila Kabeer, Ayesha Khan and Naysan Adlparvar  
IDS Working Paper 387  
First published by the Institute of Development Studies in December 2011  
© Institute of Development Studies 2011  
ISSN: 2040-0209 ISBN: 978-1-78118-044-0

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.  
All rights reserved. Reproduction, copy, transmission, or translation of any part of this publication may be made only under the following conditions:

- with the prior permission of the publisher; or
- with a licence from the Copyright Licensing Agency Ltd., 90 Tottenham Court Road, London W1P 9HE, UK, or from another national licensing agency; or
- under the terms set out below.

This publication is copyright, but may be reproduced by any method without fee for teaching or nonprofit purposes, but not for resale. Formal permission is required for all such uses, but normally will be granted immediately. For copying in any other circumstances, or for re-use in other publications, or for translation or adaptation, prior written permission must be obtained from the publisher and a fee may be payable.

Available from:  
Communications Unit, Institute of Development Studies, Brighton BN1 9RE, UK  
Tel: +44 (0) 1273 915637 Fax: +44 (0) 1273 621202  
E-mail: [bookshop@ids.ac.uk](mailto:bookshop@ids.ac.uk)  
Web: [www.ids.ac.uk/ids/bookshop](http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/bookshop)  
IDS is a charitable company limited by guarantee and registered in England (No. 877338)

# **Afghan Values or Women's Rights? Gendered Narratives about Continuity and Change in Urban Afghanistan**

Naila Kabeer, Ayesha Khan and Naysan Adlparvar

## **Summary**

There is considerable debate about the extent to which gender equality and women's rights are universal values. This debate has been particularly heated in Afghanistan where the violation of women's rights by the Taliban regime was one justification used by the US and its allies for their invasion of the country. There is, however, very little research on how ordinary Afghan women view their lives and their place within a highly patriarchal society and how their views might fit into these debates. This paper explores these issues using in-depth qualitative interviews with 12 Hazara women and their husbands in Kabul. These women are all associates of microfinance organisations and the paper also explores the extent to which access to microfinance has contributed to changes in their attitudes and relationships with others in their families and communities. The paper finds that microfinance is only one of the many changes that these women and their families have experienced in the course of their lives. While many of these changes have been extremely traumatic, they have also expanded women's horizons, opening up the possibility of new ways of organising gender relations within the family and community. The paper concludes that while the Afghan women in the study may not espouse the idea of individual rights, they would like to see a fairer gender distribution of rights and responsibilities.

**Keywords:** women's rights, gender justice, microfinance, cultural relativism, classic patriarchy

**Naila Kabeer** is Professor of Development Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London. She convened the thematic research on economic pathways to women's empowerment under the research programme Pathways of Women's Empowerment. Her research focus is on gender, poverty, labour markets and livelihoods, social protection and citizenship.

**Ayesha Khan** is a social science researcher who has been working in Pakistan for the last twenty years. Her areas of focus are poverty, gender, reproductive health, and refugee issues. Recently she has participated in a number of field-based research projects exploring the theme of empowerment, particularly with regard to its linkages with paid work for women in different local contexts, and its linkages with women's experience of induced abortion in Pakistan.

**Naysan Adlparvar** is a political ethnographer and development consultant. He worked for three years as a development practitioner in Afghanistan on gender, participatory poverty assessments, poverty reduction and related advocacy programming with NGOs and the United Nations. He has also worked in India on educational issues. Naysan is presently undertaking his DPhil at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex researching ethnic and religious identity and local-level social change processes in Afghanistan.

# Contents

	Summary, keywords and author notes	3
	Acknowledgements	4
	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1</b>	<b>Women’s place in Afghan society: an ongoing tug of war</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Afghan values or universal rights: current debates</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>3</b>	<b>A note on methodology</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Reinforcing patriarchal norms: the forces of continuity in women’s lives</b>	<b>11</b>
	4.1 Gender and everyday life in urban Afghanistan	11
	4.2 Rights, responsibilities and the patriarchal contract	12
	4.3 Rights, responsibilities and the moral community	16
<b>5</b>	<b>Questioning patriarchal norms: forces for change in women’s lives</b>	<b>18</b>
	5.1 Migration and the reflexive vantage point: ‘life was better in Iran’	18
	5.2 After the Taliban: the freedoms of everyday life	19
	5.3 Legal discourses of equality and rights	20
<b>6</b>	<b>Microfinance as a pathway of change: expanding economic opportunities</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>7</b>	<b>Interpreting the narratives: renegotiating patriarchal contracts in an era of rapid change</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>8</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>33</b>
	<b>Appendix</b>	<b>36</b>
	<b>References</b>	<b>38</b>

## Acknowledgements

This research was carried out for the Pathways of Women’s Empowerment Research Programme Consortium’s South Asia Hub, and supported by funding from the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs together with UKaid from the Department for International Development (DFID). Many thanks to Valentine Moghadam for her comments on the paper. The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of our funders.

# Introduction

This paper is part of a larger research project on the potential for paid work to provide pathways of empowerment for women living under different sets of patriarchal constraints. The concept of empowerment that informs this paper draws on Kabeer (1999, 2008). It sees women's subordinate status in society as the product of the social norms, values and practices which constrain their capacity to exercise choice and agency in key areas of their lives and relationships. These constraints can operate at a number of different levels: cognitive, social and material. They can operate through the internalisation by women as well as men of societal norms and values which position women as inferior to men, less able or worthy to exercise control over their own lives or to have a say in shaping wider institutional arrangements which characterise their society. They can operate through the unequal nature of these arrangements which give men authority and power over women's lives, whether it is through the gender-ascribed relationships of family, kinship and community or through the purportedly impersonal relations of the public domain. And they can operate through forms of material dependence which mean that women's well-being and place in society will be jeopardised if they attempt to question the given social order.

Empowerment is therefore defined as the processes of change through women gain the capacity for strategic forms of agency in the different spheres of their lives. Since such changes relate to the intersecting constraints which have disempowered women in a particular context, empowerment too is likely to encompass cognitive, social and material changes. These include women's sense of identity and self-worth; their willingness and ability to question their subordinate status; their ability to make strategic life choices, including the renegotiation or rejection of inequality in their personal relationships and finally, their ability to participate on equal terms with men in reshaping the society in which they live.

The fact that the gendered structures of constraint differ considerably across societies means that processes of empowerment are likely to vary considerably by context. The pathways through which change takes place in a society, and the forms of change that women themselves will prioritise, will be shaped in important ways by the nature of the constraints that prevail in a particular society so that there will be a certain degree of 'path-dependence' in the pace and pathways through which changes takes place in different societies (Kabeer 2008).

This paper uses detailed qualitative research to explore the empowerment potential of microfinance and paid work on the lives of 12 women and their families in the specific context of urban Afghanistan. The women in the study are all associated with two of the better known development NGOs (BRAC and Women for Women International (WfW)) that have been offering loans targeted to women since the fall of the Taliban regime. Given the turbulence of the country's recent history, access to microfinance is clearly likely to represent only one of the many changes that the women in our sample have experienced. Nor is there any a priori reason to expect it to be the most significant.

At the same time, it holds out the promise of expanding economic opportunities for women in a context in which powerful patriarchal constraints have long restricted their ability to take up paid work. One of the factors motivating this study is a survey of 1500 women in different parts of Afghanistan by Women for Women International with which Kabeer was involved (2009). The report found marked differences in the views and attitudes reported by women who were, or had been, associated with WfW compared to the rest. They were more likely to know about their rights, to believe that women had fewer rights than men in Afghanistan, to work outside the home and to express willingness to work outside the home. And while a remarkable 85 per cent of the sample were optimistic about the future of Afghanistan, 90 per

cent of WfW associates expressed this view. We were interested in exploring in greater detail what this finding might mean.

We are therefore interested in exploring some of the specific impacts of microfinance in the Afghan context but locate our exploration within the broader context of continuity and change that makes up everyday life in Afghanistan today. We begin our analysis with a brief summary of this broader context and with some of the debates about women's position in contemporary Afghan society.

## 1 Women's place in Afghan society: an ongoing tug of war

The question of women's place in Afghan society has, since the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, been characterised by an ideological tug-of-war between modernising tendencies within the urban elite, the forces of conservatism represented by the Islamic ulama upholding the sharia law and a variety of rural and tribal communities governed by customary law (Barakat and Wardell 2002). This tug of war has taken on an increasingly international dimension in recent decades. The rise to power of the Soviet-backed People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA) in 1978, and the subsequent Soviet occupation of Afghanistan (1979–1989) was associated with major efforts to emancipate women through recognition of their legal rights, including the right to work, abolition of arranged marriages and bride price, increase in the legal age of marriage and a massive literacy drive. However, as with earlier efforts to reform Afghan patriarchy, these efforts were imposed from the top and, in this case, by outside forces. Resistance to the Soviet influence became bound up with resistance to these emancipatory efforts (Centlivres-Demont 1994).

The ensuing civil war, which pitted Soviet troops and government forces against various mujahidin groups, backed by the US and its allies, saw the destruction of the rural economy and a massive displacement of the rural population. Between 1979 and 1992 around 6 million people had fled their places of origin to take refuge in Afghan cities or in neighbouring Pakistan and Iran. The mujahidin swept into power in 1992, ushering in one of the worst periods of lawlessness and human rights abuses, including widespread crimes against women, in the country's history.

They were ousted in 1994 by Taliban forces, largely drawn from young Pashtun men who had been trained in the refugee camps of Pakistan in a particularly conservative Islamic tradition and were backed by its then Islamic military regime. The Taliban held out the promise of restoring law and order but it became quickly evident that it was through a particularly harsh interpretation of Islam that discriminated both against women and ethnic minority groups. Its Ministry for the Enforcement of Islamic Virtue and Prevention of Vice, modelled along Saudi lines, imposed a virtual state of curfew on women, curtailing their freedom to move, to work and to be educated.

The plight of Afghan women was given increasing publicity by the international media but it was not until the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks on the US that it was presented as a humanitarian tragedy of sufficient scale to justify military intervention by western powers. The Karzai regime that replaced the Taliban had the full backing of the international community and the question of women's rights came to the forefront in its attempts to construct a modern democratic state.

The new constitution recognises women's equality before the law; a Ministry of Women's Affairs dedicated to the advancement of women's status was set up in 2002, along with the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) whose mandate to protect and promote human rights, also includes women's rights. Women's political participation is facilitated through the extension of voting rights, provision to participate in the national assembly and civic education. Finally, there is a strong emphasis on gender mainstreaming in donor funded programmes and projects.

While these various provisions appear to hold out the promise of greater gender equality in Afghanistan, they do pose questions about whether these current efforts to emancipate women in Afghanistan are any different from previous efforts? While it could be argued that women have voted – in unprecedented numbers – for the internationally-backed Karzai government that has spearheaded reform, it does not necessarily follow that they were voting for the model of gender equality favoured by the international community (Abirafteh 2005).

The continuing, often divisive, debates about the appropriate place for women in Afghan society suggest that this issue has not been resolved. Even among those who support women's advancement as a desirable overall goal, there are dissenting views about how this is to be achieved. In particular, as Kandiyoti points out, there is the familiar divide between 'women's rights as universal human rights vs. 'feminism-as-imperialism' (2007: 170), between those who believe that all attempts to advance the cause of women must be firmly grounded in the universality of women's human rights and those who believe it must be negotiated on the basis of Afghan values. In the next section of the paper, we examine some examples of these competing perspectives in greater detail. These provide the point of departure for our own analysis of what the women in our sample value about their lives and relationships, what aspects of change they might support and how their perspectives play out in relation to current debates.

## 2 Afghan values or universal rights: current debates

There are important areas of overlap among those who would like to see improvements in women's position in Afghan society but disagree about how it should be brought about. First of all, there is widespread recognition that a major reason for the failures of past efforts to reform women's position was that they were driven from the top-down by urban ruling elites (Barakat and Wardell 2002; Ahmed-Ghosh 2003; Kandiyoti 2007). As a result, their effects were largely confined to a small minority of women from the middle and upper classes of Kabul who were able to move around unescorted in the city, who regarded education as their right and who expected their own careers. The changes failed to filter down to women from the lower-middle and poorer classes of Kabul who continued to live much of their lives secluded within the domestic domain, rarely leaving their home without a male escort. Nor did they filter down to the majority of the population living in the vast rural hinterlands of the country.

There is also general agreement that gender inequalities in the country reflect a kinship and family system that has many features in common with what Kandiyoti (1988) described as 'classic patriarchy' and Caldwell summarised as 'extended, patrilineal, patrilocal, patriarchal, endogamous and occasionally polygynous' (1978: 558 citing Patai 1971: 84). In the Afghan context, these patriarchal structures are rooted in a society constituted by different

ethnic/tribal groups engaged in nomadic pastoralism, herding and farming, and settled agriculture and all organised along patrilineal lines (Moghadam 2002; Barakat and Wardell 2002).

There is a marked gender division of roles and responsibilities. Men are given primacy in the public sphere and are responsible for providing for the family and upholding family honour through the protection of women's virtue. The institution of purdah curtails women's mobility in the public domain and confines them to roles and responsibilities that can be carried out in the domestic sphere. They are only supposed to move about in the public domain with a male guardian. They therefore remain economically dependent on men for much of their lives. They are married off at an early age, generally within the extended kinship group, in exchange for bride-wealth and are expected to produce children as soon as possible.

Thirdly there is agreement that while patriarchal relations in Afghanistan may share certain generic features, there are also considerable variations across the country – by class, ethnicity and location. Even the veiling of women has ethnic and regional variations. The all-encompassing burqa, for instance, which was imposed by the Taliban as mandatory for any woman in the public domain, is mainly associated with female propriety among women in the Pashtun community, considered to be the most conservative of the different tribal groups. Women from some of the other ethnic groups may opt to cover themselves with large scarves or chadors (Abu-Lughod 2002). Women living in rural mountainous areas where entire settlements are made up of kin often exercise greater freedom of movement outside the home than women from lower-middle and poorer classes in urban households (Barakat and Wardell 2002).

Where opinions diverge is with regard to the implications of these patriarchal structures on women's lives and worldviews. One set of arguments, clearly aimed at countering Western depictions of Afghan culture as backward and uniquely oppressive to women, highlight the importance of local culture and religion in shaping Afghan women's own values and vision of change. As Abu-Lughod (2002: 787) points out, '“Afghan values” are as much products of their country's history and location in an interconnected world as any other set of values, including Western ones'. While critical of the essentialising assumptions of cultural relativism, she questions whether the language of 'emancipation, equality and rights' is the only language available to those seeking to bring about change in women's lives in Afghanistan. Was it not possible to recognise that women might strive for other goals that are equally important, such as closeness of family relationship, a peaceful society and the cultivation of religious piety? As she notes, many Afghan women looked to Iran for inspiration in their struggle for equality because it represented a country where women had made significant gains within an Islamic framework. An international politics of solidarity based on respect for cultural difference would mean recognising that Afghan women might have very different ideas about justice and aspire to a very different vision of society than the gender equality model espoused by the international community.

Barakat and Wardell also argue for the importance of local values. They suggest that regardless of differences of ethnicity, location and class, Afghan women are defined by their roles as wives and mothers and this is central to their identity: 'No matter how vital a woman's economic contribution to her family's well-being, this remains of secondary importance to her position as wife and mother' (2002: 920). They point out that women's revered status within the family is upheld by Quranic teachings: 'the mother is the gateway to heaven, sons need the forgiveness of their mother before they can enter heaven: the power and value of a mother's chaddar (head covering) is critical in the mobilization of men' (2002: 920). And they cite research to suggest that Afghan women themselves uphold these values: 'Afghan women wield considerable power within Afghan society, ...their opinions are respected and those viewing Afghan society through a Western feminist prism often fail to take certain concepts of obligations and responsibilities into account' (2002: 920).

Barakat and Wardell suggest that the primary mistake of analysts unfamiliar with Afghan culture is their preoccupation with women's absence from the public domain and concomitant neglect of the private domain of family and kinship. Yet it is in the private domain in which women exercise most influence and which represents their primary source of security and status in Afghan society. They argue therefore for 'gradual, cautious and culturally sensitive approaches' which recognise that women's needs are inseparable from those of their family and kinship and do not seek to jeopardise these institutions. Rather than singling women out for assistance, as many development agencies have done, they should work with women as an integral part of the family unit, 'harnessing coping strategies that utilize family mechanisms authentically shaped by Afghan culture and traditions' (2002: 925).

Their view of the separate but complementary nature of family and kinship relationships is challenged by other contributors to the debate. While Ahmed-Ghosh (2006) agrees that women in Afghanistan are defined by their place within the family and community and that their economic and social security is tied to their familial roles and identity, she draws a different set of conclusions about its implications. She sees family and kinship relationships as simultaneously the key source of women's survival, wellbeing and security as well as the primary structure of their oppression. Denied education, employment or property by custom and religion, perceived as bearers of family honour, women's 'complementary' and subordinate relationship to men serves to secure the social standing of the family and the coherence of the community but at the cost of their ability to negotiate their rights or protect themselves: '...education about rights becomes superfluous because women do not have the means to disassociate themselves from the family nor claim autonomy based on economic self-sufficiency' (2006: 124). Her conclusion therefore is that women need a degree of economic independence before they can engage in any struggle to define or demand their rights.

Moghadam (2002) similarly rejects the benign view of women's status within the family. She notes that while senior patriarchal figures within the kinship group exercise authority over all family members, including younger men, female members are subjected to far more restrictive norms and values than males and occupy a more subordinate position. Improvements in their status within the household are not merely bound up with the bearing of *children*, as Barakat and Wardell (2002) maintain, but the bearing of *sons*. The strong culture of son preference in Afghanistan explains the excess levels of female mortality and high proportions of men to women that have long characterised the country's population – although the masculinity of its sex ratio has declined after many years of conflict.

Moghadam attributes the slow progress on women's basic human rights in Afghanistan to structural constraints which long predate the draconian controls over women imposed by the Taliban. She points also to the absence of a strong central state capable of implementing modernising programmes in the face of the 'tribal feudalism' that has thwarted sporadic efforts to do so throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Finally she comments on the silence of many international feminists with regard to the worst excesses of the Mujahidin which appeared to reflect the widespread view that the promotion of women's rights was somehow inappropriate in a developing Muslim country. She strongly rejects the politics of cultural relativism that maintains that women's rights and gender justice must be defined on the basis of local norms and values and calls for a transnational feminist politics that is unified around a set of basic issues such as education, income and reproductive rights for women – regardless of cultural context.

These debates about gender relations in Afghanistan clearly offer contrasting evaluations of the consequences of patriarchal constraints for women's voice, status and influence in Afghan society and mirror larger debates about universalism versus cultural relativism in the development literature. We would like to draw attention to two aspects of this debate that

provide the point of departure for the present paper. The first is that while there is a general caution against sweeping generalisations about 'Afghan women', there is very uneven attention given to the possibility that there might be dissenting views about Afghan values among Afghan women themselves. Indeed, Barakat and Wardell (2002) suggest that where such dissension exists, it represents a division between 'insider' and 'outsider' perspectives. While Abu-Lughod cautions against essentialising Afghan culture and taking a more historical view of it, her focus too is on the values closely associated with this particular history (2002). It is Moghadam (2002) who points out the need to recognise the possibility that Afghan women might hold a variety of different positions with regard to Afghan traditions and values: while some women may find security and status within the accepted boundaries of the family, there are others who seek to challenge the public-private distinction in both open and hidden ways.

The second point is related to the first. Despite the recent flurry of publications dealing with gender relations in Afghanistan, we know very little about the views and values of ordinary women – and men – who are the subject of these debates. Where women's voices are cited in the literature, they tend to be women who are already highly politically active or prominent within the NGO community in Afghanistan.<sup>1</sup> We therefore have very little idea how those that are not similarly active or prominent might position themselves in relation to these debates. It is this gap in the literature that our research seeks to address.

### 3 A note on methodology

Given that our research in Afghanistan is part of a larger project on the theme of paid work as a pathway of women's empowerment, we needed to identify a suitable group of working women to participate in our research. Current evidence shows extremely low levels of economic activity by women in Afghanistan, including in urban areas, and much of it in various forms of self-employment (World Bank 2005). We consequently decided to use access to microfinance as the focus of our research and contacted two microfinance organisations, BRAC and WfW, who were working exclusively with women, to help us select our sample. Given the difficulties of carrying out fieldwork in Afghanistan, we decided to restrict our research to Kabul. In any case, microfinance organisations tend to be more active in urban areas. The organisation of the fieldwork, including interviews and translation, was carried out by Naysan Adlparvar and Sogol Zand. The interviews were carried out in two rounds. In the first round (carried out between May 2009 and July 2009), 12 women were approached to participate in the research, the objectives of the research explained to them and their consent obtained. Detailed interviews, following a loose life history format, were then carried out. Wherever possible, a second interview was carried out with at least one senior member of the family, usually the husband, in order to get a different perspective on the women's contributions. There were six such secondary interviews. The interviews were mainly carried out in Dari and then translated into English. A preliminary reading of the interviews identified certain gaps in the information provided and a number of women were visited a second time in October 2009.

The women in our sample range from lower-middle class to poor working class but given that microfinance organisations do not generally lend to the extreme poor, none of the women in our sample came from this category. While we did not set out to study any particular ethnic group, our sample is made up entirely of women from the Hazara community. The main reason for this is that this group, who make up around 9 per cent of the population, has long

---

<sup>1</sup> Even a recent article by Ahmed-Ghosh (2006) entitled 'Voices of Afghan Women' which does draw directly on women's voices to discuss the issue of women's rights is limited to the voices of three internationally prominent women activists from Afghanistan who each have well-worked out political views about the way forward for women.

been seen as among the most repressed in the country and are consequently favoured by organisations working with poorer sections of society. They made up the majority of the women that were being served by both the two microfinance organisations we were working with. They speak Dari and are largely Shia. They thus differ in important ways from the Pashtuns, the largest ethnic group in Afghanistan (around 60 per cent of the population) who are mainly Pashto-speaking Sunnis. Unlike the majority Sunni community, Hazara women never fully adopted the full covering of the burqa, opting instead for the full length open-faced chador/namoz. They have a long history of persecution and were singled out by the Taliban. Many fled to Iran and Pakistan for safety. The Hazara community is considered to have somewhat less repressive gender relations than the majority Pashtun community (Minority Rights Group n.d.). Consequently, they allow us to explore the question of Afghan values and women's rights from the margins rather than from the mainstream of Afghan society.

In this paper, we use the narratives of the women in our sample to explore the extent to which they do indeed value the roles and responsibilities assigned to them by their society, as asserted by some authors, the extent to which they would like to see change, as claimed by others, and the kinds of changes that they would like to see. We are interested not only in what they have to say about these matters but also in what their narratives tell us about the influence of the larger forces of continuity and change in their society on the values, beliefs and preferences that they express. If women accept the status, roles and relationships ascribed to them by their culture, is it because this gives meaning and purpose to their lives, because they are unable to imagine any alternative set of social arrangements or because failure to comply would incur too high a social cost? And if women cite instances of injustice in their lives, do they see such injustice as the product of individual aberration or something more systemic?

## 4 Reinforcing patriarchal norms: the forces of continuity in women's lives

### 4.1 Gender and everyday life in urban Afghanistan

Kabul has seen unprecedented growth in its population since the fall of the Taliban, as millions of displaced Afghans have headed to cities instead of rural areas, in an effort to stake out a new livelihood strategy for their families. The livelihood strategies mapped out by the women respondents are clearly a contemporary response to the current economic scenario and opportunities. Their families were, and continue to be divided, across the region, having moved around a number of times during the last decades of conflict from Afghanistan to Pakistan and Iran, back to Kabul, only to regroup elsewhere if income cannot be generated. Goods and money continue to flow across these divisions, allowing people to survive in difficult times.

Nevertheless, despite the upheavals that they have been through, the description of family life that emerges from the women's narratives conforms in many ways to the division of roles and responsibilities associated with classic patriarchy. The women in our sample, together with their daughters, bore primary responsibility for domestic chores, regardless of other demands on their time from income generation or, in the case of the latter, education. All but one of the women in our sample were engaged in some form of paid work, although only one or two worked in a formal office job or reported a daughter that did. The rest worked on an informal, and generally intermittent, basis within or near the home (see Appendix). Activities included running a small shop, working as a guard, making quilts, breaking almonds, hairdressing, home-based embroidery, carpet weaving, making tassels for scarves, baking,

tailoring and livestock rearing. One woman had set up her own bakery, another opened a hairdressing salon, while one cleaned offices on a casual basis. Most women kept back some or all of their income for household needs. While the demands of work and loan repayment required some of the women in our sample to move around in the public domain – to go to shops, bakeries, NGO offices – they stressed that their husbands always knew where they were and they were generally accompanied, even if it was only by one of their children.

Men exercised authority, made key decisions and managed family finances. While a number of them did the shopping for the household, neither fathers nor sons participated in domestic work. Their economic activities, both current and past, bore the imprint of many years of conflict more clearly than those of the women. They were far more heterogeneous than those of the women, entailed greater geographical distances and straddled legal and illegal activities. They included working in the army, heroin smuggling, working for a bus company, running a taxi or cart, trading in stolen antiques, daily wage labour, renting out equipment, portering, trading in salt or potatoes, running a tailoring shop or grocery shop and office jobs. Some of the men were unemployed. Most men were out of the house most of the day, coming home only in the evening to eat, watch TV and sleep. They had many more opportunities to engage in wider social interactions than women as well as meeting regularly with other men from the extended family for Quran reading sessions and discussion of family matters.

#### **4.2 Rights, responsibilities and the patriarchal contract**

This division of roles and responsibilities meant that the domestic domain featured as a far more significant location for the women's daily lives than those of the men. Many families lived within extended family networks so that while husbands and children occupied centre stage in women's narratives, members of the extended family – primarily husband's kin – also featured frequently. If we want to understand the forces of continuity in women's subordinate status in Afghan society, then the continued centrality of family and kinship in women's lives, and the sheer historical weight of its norms and traditions, must play a central role.

Many of the women we interviewed subscribed to a normative model of relations between men and women within the family based on the idea of a patriarchal contract, often drawing on religion as sanction, which spelt out their rights and responsibilities. They accepted that men's greater responsibilities in providing for their families and protecting family honour justified their greater rights and privileges, including decision-making power over their wives and children and the right to discipline them – with the use of violence if necessary.

In some cases, women offered accounts which emphasised the mutuality of rights and responsibilities. According to Jamila:

... women have rights. They work hard at home, they raise their children. Only God knows what is happening in a mother's heart from the time that children are little to when they become adults. That is why mothers have rights and children have to respect their mothers. Women also have rights with regard to others... she is a partner in the house. When she marries, both husband and wife have rights. When you have a daughter-in-law, you should accept that this is her home as well. God gives these rights, they are God's words... Men have rights. They work hard, they make money. If they work in an office, their brains work. If they are daily labourers, they use their sweat. The man has rights over his wife and children. ... his rights are whatever is required: good food, clothes washed, house clean, children educated, no fighting in the house, taking care of guests, having his tea and food ready, making sure daughters are not around boys...

For other women, their rights were conditional on male consent; without it they could not exercise their rights. As Farah put it: 'Women's rights come from their husbands. If I want to buy something, I ask my husband. If he says, lets paint the house, I accept it'.

Others believed that religion legitimated a male monopoly of rights. As Pareesha put it:

A man's rights are clear. In their opinion, they are free, they can have ten wives, they can go anywhere. These are men's rights. If my husband marries another woman, what can I do? Islam has given these rights. Imam Ali. He is the first and most important iman of the Shias. He had forty wives and we are his followers. Men are able to have two or three wives at least.

The significance that many women attached to the patriarchal contract was evident in their constructions of the 'virtuous woman' as the woman who complied unquestioningly with its terms. Farah described her attempts to make the transition from a carefree unmarried 'girl at home' who took an interest in her clothes and had her own money to spend to a virtuous married woman whose primary duty was to her husband:

I am 'heavier' now [more composed]. I used to think about myself, but I am free from these thoughts now. I wash my husbands' clothes, I support him... Be an 'outside' woman if you have to but it doesn't mean that you should not do the work at home. I work in a way that my husband can never have any excuse to say, why are you like this?

Layla's account offered an even sharper contrast between the virtuous submissive woman and the loose and fearless woman who was her diametrical opposite:

I am a woman and I pray to God that he does not make me fearless... Those women who are fearless go to whore houses. I am scared of my husband. Husbands have to control women or men will lose their reputations. Women can be very loose. A woman should be conservative. She shouldn't talk to strangers... My husband is crippled but I look up to him, my children look up to him. I wash his clothes. I won't step outside without his permission. If I go out, he gets angry and says, why did you go out without my permission? I am scared of him. I always ask him whether I can go out or not. Maybe he sometimes slaps me.

For Farah and Layla, anticipation of their husband's expectations was the guiding principle for their behaviour, but whereas the former sought to pre-empt the possibility of a reprimand from her husband, Layla's compliance was underpinned by fear of her husband. Although she only referred in passing to her husband's use of physical violence, her son confirmed that he had often beaten both his wife and sons.

In fact, one of the most striking findings emerging from our interviews, and one supported by the secondary literature,<sup>2</sup> was the high levels of physical violence that punctuated everyday life. Almost every woman in our admittedly small sample reported direct experience of violence, their accounts often backed up by children who were sometimes present at the interview. Along with references to violent outbreaks between men in the community, there were reports of mothers-in-law beating daughters-in-law, brothers beating sisters, parents beating their children and, most frequently of all, husbands beating their wives. Men's right to

---

<sup>2</sup> Violence against women – including physical, sexual and psychological violence - is one of the main security problems for women in Afghanistan (Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) 2008) to the extent of being considered 'natural' in Afghan homes (DFID 2008). Of 2133 cases recorded by MoWA, between 2005–06, 47 per cent were related to beating and 36 per cent to 'forced' marriage (MoWA 2008). Of the acts of violence committed against women, 82 per cent were by family members (UNIFEM 2006).

beat their wives appeared to be an accepted feature of the marital contract: husbands were justified in beating their wives if they ceased to behave like 'good' women, acted selfishly or wilfully disobeyed their husbands or, as in the case of Hafiza, because they had failed to produce a son. The use of violence thus served to reinforce the effects of social norms in securing women's submission to the patriarchal authority structure of the family.

However, the incidence of violence reported by our respondents could not be fully explained by perceived failures or transgressions on the part of women. As some of the women themselves acknowledged, they were also bound up with the stresses and strains that men were going through as a result of the disruptions to the economy caused by several years of conflict, the erosion of their capacity to carry out their breadwinning roles and the frustrations this engendered. An exceptionally large number of the husbands in our sample were, for various reasons, unable to live up to their socially ascribed roles of primary breadwinners. Some were disabled, as in the case of Layla's husband, some could not find jobs, some only worked on an intermittent basis while others lived in constant fear of losing the jobs they had.

Many of the women explained their husbands' violence in language that – consciously or unconsciously – touched upon the consequences of these stresses and strains. In the case of Naz's husband, violence appeared to have physical origins: he had an accident which affected his hearing and left him prone to headaches: 'he is sick, it is not his fault'. But it had also left him 'very bad-tempered: the moment you speak, he shouts, whatever he can grab, he throws... he does not beat me but he throws everything at the door, at the walls, he shouts at the children'.

Farah described her husband as a 'nervous wreck': 'He is moody. Sometimes he is so good and sometimes he is so bad-tempered, he gets angry and slaps and kicks me'. She did not necessarily consider this as acceptable behaviour, but she was also resigned to it:

I told him. 'I hope you die young'. If I had the power, I would want to beat him. But I told myself, you are a woman, you have to tolerate it... Last time he beat me because there was no food in the house and he said I should have told him. Later he said sorry and I said, it is OK, women are for beating.

Parwana's husband was 'always anxious and tense'. She attributed it to his experience in the army:

All military men are like this... He did not beat us but my children were very scared of him... I was scared of him too. I was very young and he was old... I would speak softly so that my children would not lose their spirit. I was scared of breaking the peace.

It also transpired that her husband had started drinking alcohol on a daily basis about a year ago which led to an increase in his violence towards his children. However, he has stopped this now as he is afraid of his sons.<sup>3</sup> Her husband himself admitted to us that he had been a 'bit tough' on the children and that he had once kicked his wife though he could not remember the reason for it. He told us that the constant stresses of survival made him angry. His main concern was the insecurity of his present employment with a development agency which had begun to lay off many of its workers.

Pareesha had earlier been forced into marriage with a man that she described as 'psychotic': 'I would have rather looked into the eyes of a dog than into the eyes of my first husband. He didn't like me either and he used to beat me'. She had divorced him with her family's support but had to leave her three sons behind. She had subsequently remarried to a man who had two daughters and one son from a previous marriage. They later had two sons of their own.

---

<sup>3</sup> As he told us, they had started going to body building classes.

She described her current husband as 'bad-tempered': 'He doesn't make any concessions. He starts beating'. One of their most violent rows had been in Iran when she had arranged a birthday party for their child without letting him know.

While his violence appeared to increase when they returned to Afghanistan, she was sympathetic because she saw what his failure to find a job did to him: 'It was very hard for him, he was supposed to be the breadwinner of the family'. Things improved after she began to take loans from BRAC and he was able to set up a taxi business. He still came home angry and frustrated because as she explained: 'Poor him: he is alone. He is not in a good financial situation. He brings issues from outside into our home'. To this day, she said that: 'If I go anywhere without his permission, I would have butterflies in my stomach'. Pareesha's husband acknowledged his violence towards her but was clearly uncomfortable about it: 'Why should I lie, yes, sometimes I had to beat her, but I would always apologise to her afterwards'.

In a number of cases, domestic violence diminished over time: sons grew older and were able to restrain their fathers and fathers themselves grew older. Hafiza had not only suffered a great deal of violence for producing one daughter after another, but was also forced to accept her husband's decision to take a second wife in the hope of a son. This did not happen and after a while, his violence abated. One reason for this was the novel way that Hafiza had found of satisfying his desire for a son which was to dress – and treat – one of her daughters as a boy until she reached adolescence: 'it makes his heart happy'.

In Naghma's case, however, the violence had not abated<sup>4</sup> but appeared to be passing on to the next generation. She told us how her daughter sometimes sought to intervene when she was being beaten by her husband: 'she tells her father, 'don't beat my mother, don't beat my mother' and she tries to stop him but he pushes her away. My sons don't try to stop him but they cry'. However, one of her sons had started to beat his sister when he got angry. When she remonstrated with him, he replied, 'she is a girl. I have to do this'.

Unlike Pareesha's husband, Naghma's husband did not appear to have any qualms about his use of violence to deal with conflict:

Sometimes I deal with the problem by just smiling. Sometimes I deal with it by beating her hard. With women sometimes the solution is just to beat them hard. Sometimes I buy her a gift.

One other factor that appeared to secure women's submission to patriarchal authority within the family was the importance they attached to their relationships with their children. It was for their children that many women welcomed the opportunity to earn a living and it was on their children that they spent much of the money at their disposal. The moodiness, bad temper and violence displayed by many of the men in our sample often drove a wedge between children and their fathers and it was to their mothers that many turned. This appeared to be the case even when, as in the case of Pareesha, they were step-children. She told us: 'I am the one they come to. I don't want to compliment myself but it is me who is their support at home. They respect me. I respect them too. I would do anything for them'.

Fear of losing their children was what led some women to resign themselves to the violence of their marriages. Since women have no custodial rights to their children, to leave a violent or abusive husband was to leave their children. As Layla said: 'I love my children, my children are everything to me, I would never leave them. We had a fight once and he told me to go if I wanted. I said, I will never leave my children'.

---

<sup>4</sup> Her conflicting relationship with her husband had been exacerbated by his affair with a woman living nearby.

Naghma had been advised by her parents and sister to leave her violent husband. She explained why she had not taken their advice:

I really love my children. I can't leave him because of them... I feel I am a coward. Some people would face up to him but I don't. I am scared my life would be ruined... I am scared of losing my family. My husband never swallows his pride. I am scared that he will ... take my children from me ... he will tell me to go to my father's home... I pray to God for my husband's behaviour to change. I really have no other wish but that. Sometimes I think I am very stupid, what is there for me to stay for in this house? But I love my family.

#### **4.3 Rights, responsibilities and the moral community**

If the unequal power dynamics of marriage and family life make it difficult for women to challenge perceived injustices within the family, the pressure to accept their fate is reinforced by their social isolation. For all the closeness of their family relationships, many of the women in our sample appeared to be lonely. Almost none of them spoke of friends of their own who they might turn to in times of trouble. Most of them turned to elders within the family or religious figures. As Nadia's mother told us:

When there is a problem, we go to our elders, our 'white beards'. We don't know anything about the police or human rights. My children are just doing their carpet weaving, I am in my own world.

Others would seek solace in their faith or as Farah put it, 'keep it inside themselves'. There is little in any of these options to encourage them to question the justice of the prevailing order.

As might be expected, relationships with abusive or violent husbands constitute a major source of stress and depression in the lives of many women. Pareesha recalled the early years in Kabul after her family returned from Iran when her husband had no work, took out his frustrations on her and she no family of her own to support her: 'I would think God has turned his back on me. No money, no job, being lonely... If there had been someone I could have talked to at least... I was not allowed to go out either'. She had on one occasion turned to her husband's parents for support, but had been told: 'You have to tolerate it'.

Safa had gone to her doctor because she wanted advice on divorcing her husband. He had first advised her to go to the government or to the mullah but when he realised she was pregnant, told her that divorce was out of the question. Naghma had turned to her own family for advice on how to deal with her husband and they had sought to intervene on her behalf. As a result, her husband had forbidden her to have any further contact with them.

It was to their faith that almost all the women in our sample turned in times of trouble or need but here they made a very clear distinction between different aspects of religion. There was a remarkably unanimous mistrust of mullahs. Pareesha only went to a mullah to clarify some aspect of religious etiquette: 'we are Shias, how should we behave with Ismailis, should we eat with them?'. Jamila might go if she reached a dead end with her doctor, 'if we reach a dead end, we go to the mullah, if my child is sick, I might go the mullah, he will give me a taviz or tell me to go to the doctor'.

Otherwise, most of the women were scathing in their comments:

I think mullahs are a waste of money. In my opinion you should ask for your needs from God or from a shrine, not from a mullah. They make fun of the Quran. They write prayers and they wrap it up and give it to you (in an amulet). Some people are

desperate and have not had their needs met so they go to the Mullah in the hope that he can do something for them. (Pareesha)

I don't go to the mullah. I don't believe in him, I don't like him. I think he lies. He is not from God... I think they say they are pure but they are not as pure as they say. I think academics<sup>5</sup> are better than mullahs. (Saeeda)

I don't go to the mullah, why should you go to the mullah. Whatever is in your heart is right. When you have a need, you go to the shrine. Or I go to the mosque – that is God's home. (Nadia)

Instead the women turned to other forms of religious support and advice. A number of the women cited the teachings of prominent religious clerics like Mohsini, Iman Khomeini and Mohaqiq Kabuli, as providing their moral compass. Mohsini has his own TV channel which is an important source of information on religious matters. Both Farah and Saeeda welcomed his proposed legislation on Shia personal law which seeks to uphold male authority and responsibility within marriage and represents an interpretation of Islamic law that would enhance the security of married women. Farah could not understand why some women had demonstrated against the legislation and had demanded that women should be as free as men: 'How is it possible for a women to go out without her husbands' permission?'

But it is their pilgrimages to local shrines, a long standing custom among the Hazara community, which women cited most frequently as a source of peace, solace and support. A number of them distinguished between the formality of the mosque and the relaxed spirituality and sociability of the shrine. While the mosque was seen as the house of God, a place for formal prayers on holy days, it was not a place where these women seemed to feel comfortable. Instead it was the shrine they went to when there was a problem in the family or when they needed comfort.

Hafiza said:

I don't have anyone here, my sister is in Iran. Women do not have anywhere to go, there is no one in the mosque they can talk to. When my husband gets angry I go to the shrine. Or when I want something from God. I go whenever I have time.

A number of them spoke of the sense of community they felt at the shrine. As Layla put it: 'I don't need anyone but God. In the shrines, there are needy people, you can cook and distribute to them'.

According to Pareesha:

I pray, I pray for my children. I went to the shrine of Shah Ghubad last year. It really fulfils your needs. We went to ask for the health of my nephew, he is crippled. It was a beautiful place and we had a good time there. I go the shrine of the Twelve Imams every day to pray for the prosperity of my shop. I pray that my husband's temper changes.

---

<sup>5</sup> Presumably with reference to the interviewers.

## 5 Questioning patriarchal norms: forces for change in women's lives

As the preceding discussion suggests, there are powerful forces buttressing patriarchal structures in Afghanistan and seeking to restrict women's capacity to challenge, or even, question patriarchal norms. At the same time, Afghanistan is a society that has been undergoing major changes, particularly in recent decades, changes which have had major repercussions on patterns of gender relations in everyday life. While the most recent major change was the Allied invasion, the overthrow of the Taliban and their replacement by the Karzai regime, this had been preceded by many years of war, disruption and exile. Long-established ways of organising gender relations could be evaluated critically because of exposure to other ways of organising these relations, ways that did not necessarily appear 'western' or 'alien' to Afghan culture. As a result, what may otherwise have been taken for granted as the natural moral order by women who have been described as among the most excluded in an increasingly integrated world (Moghadam 2002: 19) was becoming the subject of the competing discourses of justice and morality to which ordinary women had access.

### 5.1 Migration and the reflexive vantage point: 'life was better in Iran'

One major source of change was the large-scale displacement of the population as a result of the war and the associated urbanisation of what had been a largely rural population. Many Afghans, and Hazaras among them, had gone to live in Iran for varying periods of time. Others had gone to refugee camps in Pakistan. They did not go back to their villages on their return but made their way to Kabul to seek a living. A large percentage of this displaced population was female. For many, this was their first experience of what it meant to live in, or near, a city, including access to water, roads, markets, jobs, health services and schools.

In addition, for the women in our sample, and for some of the men, the experience of having lived outside of Afghanistan for a number of years had given them a reflexive distance from which to evaluate their own society and to compare it with the different realities that prevailed in other Muslim countries. The expression of the view that *'life was better in Iran'* was one of the surprising refrains that ran through a number of their narratives. However, the reasons they gave had little to do with religion per se: rather they appeared to reflect the value that women attached to the benefits that came from being part of a functioning state.

It was evident that women believed that Iran not only offered more genuine security of life and livelihoods but better education and mobility for women and a higher standard of living. It was also considered to be a society that respects and delivers on women's rights, where police can be relied on for protection. Naghma had first-hand experience of this. She had complained to the police about her husband's violence when they lived in Iran. The police had come to their house and forced him to apologise. He had behaved better for two months but had then gone back to his old behaviour. Now that they were back in Afghanistan where he had his entire family around him, she saw no point seeking external help for fear he would simply take away her children.

Pareesha held Iran up as a model for Afghanistan. She believed that it was superior because it allowed women greater freedom of movement outside the home than Afghan society did:

If women stay at home, the country will regress. Men cannot have ideas all by themselves. Iranians look down on Afghans but they respect the Japanese and Koreans because both women and men try to make their country.

She also said that she had learnt to value daughters during her time in Iran: 'The Afghans celebrate when a boy is born. I think if a girl is born, she should be celebrated. What is the difference? I now have two beautiful daughters. I love them very much'. She also felt that others around her had been changed by their exposure to different realities:

men can no longer put pressure. Some men have seen the world... People have communicated with other people. They have sought refuge in other countries and have changed. When you meet different people, you realise things.

Safa held similar views about the status of women and girls in Iran. She herself was illiterate but she saw how so many girls went to school: 'When we went to Iran, I didn't want to come back. When I went there, I started to know the world'. She had also learnt different values: she had been beating her child in a park in Iran and was stopped by a group of students who told her she should never beat a child. But she saw these changes in others in her society: men had also learnt from living away from Afghanistan. Even her mother told her 'the time for beating children with an electric cable is long past – you should advise them instead'. Wafa believed it was only a matter of time before things improved in Afghanistan: 'In ten years Afghanistan will be like Iran and women will have freedom and security'.

## **5.2 After the Taliban: the freedoms of everyday life**

Within Afghanistan itself, the fall of the Taliban and its replacement by the Karzai government brought a number of important changes in its wake, both removal of the various restrictions that had been imposed by the Taliban and the launch of major efforts on the part of the international community to construct a modern democratic state in Afghanistan. For all the limitations and compromises made by the Karzai government, it was welcomed by the women in our sample because it was seen to have given political representation to their community for the first time in history. They also associated it with visible evidence of progress: the availability of gas and electricity, the asphaltting of roads, the increase in economic activity, improved access to the media, particularly television, and the proliferation of development NGOs, including the microfinance organisations to be discussed in the next section.

The women were able to look back on the past from the vantage point of the present. It is evident from what they said that, with one exception, none of the women and men in our sample believed that the repressive model of gender relations associated with the Taliban resonated with their own interpretations of religion and culture. When they described life in the Taliban era, they often described it in terms of fear. According to Safa: 'We were all scared then. When I went out somewhere, I would come back quickly so that they could not hurt me'. Parwana spoke of how 'at that time, we used to fall a lot' because they had to wear the encompassing burqa when they went out. Farah remembered that they could not even go on pilgrimage to holy shrines: 'They would beat you. During the Taliban regime, women were worth nothing'. Jamila spoke of the fear that kept working women at home as well as boys because they feared for their lives: 'nothing could be done because of the Taliban, people's hands and feet were tied'.

Only Hafiza offered any positive assessment of the Taliban:

The Taliban were good for women, women had to observe their Islamic hijab. They would lash those who did not cover themselves. It was worse for men, they would harass the men, they would lash them. Now everybody is uncovered.

Her husband too, while he condemned many aspects of the Taliban years ('when the Taliban came to power, neither men nor women were 'alive'. When a man is not alive, a woman is

not alive too, especially for Shi'a people'), nevertheless believed that they had upheld the rule of law: 'in the taxi, there was a curtain between men and women; men and women were separate'.

If the recurring theme in the women's narratives of the Taliban era was fear, the word that summarises the difference between 'then' and 'now' is freedom. This is not freedom in any absolute sense of the word but in relation to the past. It refers to the ordinary freedoms that men and women in much of the world, including neighbouring countries, take for granted but that has been denied to Afghan citizens by both the earlier Mujahadeen regime as well as the Taliban who succeeded them. The women, in particular, valued their newly regained freedom of movement and the other freedoms that came with it:

Since the Taliban left, we have been free. Now we wear the chador namoz. We can go out freely. We can go shopping. My daughters can go to school. Men can go and work in peace. The Taliban did not let girls study. Now I see on TV that girls go to karate class. Freedom is good, anyone can go out with honour. Now people are happy, they go to school and work. Best is children can go to school, people can make a living in peace. Our streets have asphalt. I see on TV that women are doing tailoring and carpet weaving, these are very important. (Jamila)

Women are freer now, people are freer. Women wear better clothes, they can go to the bazaar, they can sit in a car with a man. If they want, they can wear a headscarf or they can go out with uncovered hair. Girls can go to schools, literate women can admit they are literate and work in organisations. Now men and women vote equally. Women can be proud because they can work. The government is looking after women. (Farah)

Women have more freedom. Now I can go out freely. It is important for me. I don't want to be confined... Now everyone can go out wearing what they want. People are free now. They can study. Since the time of the Mujahadin, no one was able to study... Even infants can study now. (Safa)

Nadia's mother compared women's enforced financial dependence on men during the Taliban era: 'They only ate. They were relying on men to bring money home... only men could work' – with their present opportunities: 'Now you eat from what you can earn, you can function independently... Now there are jobs for women, you can work in agriculture, in organisations. People now have hope. At that time I covered my face. Now I keep it uncovered. The weather is hot and I can't see in front of me'.

Nadia agreed: 'It is better now, there is more freedom, girls are working in the doctor's offices, they go to the bazaar, it is good for them. Both women and men can work now, people can walk freely, they can go to school, they can be teachers, women could not be teachers before. And it is OK if we go out without socks'.

### **5.3 Legal discourses of equality and rights**

The renewed focus on governance structures in the period of post-war reconstruction led to the expansion in opportunities for political participation and the emergence of a more legalistic discourse of equality and alternative jurisdictions to those of kinship and community. Ordinary women were exposed to these ideas through their interactions with neighbours, customers and microfinance organisations as well as through the media. The TV in particular, an important channel through which women learnt about what was happening in the larger world, was also the medium through which parallel discourses about rights and responsibilities were communicated to the Afghan population. Along with conservative discourses rooted in the moral economy of kinship, community and faith and actively disseminated by religious figures like Mohsini, the TV exposed them to a new liberal

discourse around gender equality promoted by the international community through an aid-dependent government.

Women's views about this emerging discourse on gender were not uniform. For some, it merely contributed to the erosion of past constraints and greater laxity around women's behaviour. Others were far more positive about the emerging discourse on women's rights because it allowed them to question the gender asymmetries embedded in customary norms and traditions. Despite the normative model of mutual rights and responsibilities spelt out by the classic patriarchal contract, the reality was that men appeared to have a monopoly of rights and privileges while women bore the main burden of responsibilities. Nor was there any realistic prospect within the moral economy of kinship and religion of holding men to account for the abuse of their privileges.

From this perspective, the legal discourse around women's rights appeared to rectify some of the imbalances of classic patriarchy. This was nicely illustrated by Safa's views. She drew on religion to talk about men's rights: 'From a religious point of view, we say husbands have rights. We should not disrespect husbands. Some are good, some are not. I respect my husband a lot. I pour him tea, I wash his clothes, I fulfil my duties'. But when asked about women's rights, she spoke of the new jurisdiction as holding men to account:

Men were not scared before but now they are. I tell my husband, if you beat me, I will report you... Now women are being paid attention to, husbands care about their wives. Violence against women had come down because people were scared to go to jail. I watch it on TV. You can see if women are oppressed, men are punished.

This view that the emerging discourse of women's rights constituted a restraint on male power was held by a number of women. It was expounded at some length and most eloquently by Pareesha. She spoke of men's ability to exercise absolute power over women in the past: 'A woman did not have any rights. She did not have any courage. Even if she was likely to be killed, she did not have the right to complain... if a woman brought up the subject of divorce, she would be killed'. She resented the way that religion had been used to uphold men's monopoly of rights and believed that there had to be some way of making men more accountable for their actions: 'there has to be a force on men. If there isn't, awful things happen to women...'. In her view, the setting up of the Human Rights Commission and a police force that was willing to intervene on behalf of women were a move in this direction: '

It is better now because women can go and complain if there is violence and the man will be in trouble. If my husband beats me and I am at fault, for example, if I go out without his permission, I accept it. But if I am in beaten in this place where I have no family, without being at fault, then I have to go and complain. So they can ask him, why? What did you see to beat her?... I haven't been there but they support women's rights. The husband cannot make her do things... The government has brought these changes. Before, it was better for a woman to die than to get a divorce. Now there is a slogan that God says as long as there is a right to marry, there is a right to divorce.

Of the 12 women in our sample, Pareesha was also the most forthright in her support for equal rights:

Everybody has to have rights. There shouldn't be any difference. It is not right that only men should have rights. Are women not also creatures of God? If only my husband would just say to me, 'OK I don't mind what you are doing', it would be like the world had been given to me. I would work hard for my children, I would make halal money...

However, others also expressed the view that the rights discourse was beginning to have an effect. While Saeeda believed that her husband beat her less now that her sons were grown

up, her neighbour's view was that there had been a generalised reduction of violence: 'They can't because you see on TV that women have rights and men cannot beat them'.

Parwana had begun to question the absolute authority that religion and custom appeared to have bestowed on men:

Rights are something you have to defend. You cannot only accept whatever your husband tells you. You should fight. A woman has the right to work. There are women in Afghanistan who do not have the right to go to their parents' home. A woman has the right to say, 'my mother and father should be respected'. God has given these rights to women and husbands should accept them. Men have all the rights. They can have unlimited wives, they have control over life and everything. Islam has given all these rights to men. I agree with these rights to some extent and to some extent I don't. I don't like a man to have control over everything. If my husband forbids me to work, I would try and resolve it through good behaviour. If he forbids me to see my parents, I would try to solve it through discussion. If I can't, I would ask an elder to solve it.

Naghma despaired that her husband would ever change his behaviour towards her. She continued to see women's rights as conditional on husbands' approval and her dutiful behaviour:

Women to some extent should be able to know what rights are. She has to consult her husband, then she can get the rights. Not to be reprimanded, to be able to work, these are her rights. But I don't mean that she should ignore her husband or family.

But she questioned the justice of husbands who used their power without regard for how their wives might feel:

...when she works hard at home, there should be kindness towards her. If I am beaten, my heart is broken. My right is that I should be able to ask my husband, 'Why am I guilty?'. I pray to God that he can tell me what has happened. Why don't I have the right to choose my own clothes or to go to my parents' house? A woman is not an animal.

In addition, she shared the widely expressed belief that at the general level, there had been some improvement in the lives of women: 'Back then women were like slaves. Now they have better lives, they have authority'. She regarded the ability to vote to be the most important change in women's lives: 'you are considered a person and women are recognised as human beings'. She knew that the law gave women more rights than before and that there was a commission that they could go to with their complaints. She believed that the women's organisations active in the country had been a major force in modifying men's ability to restrict women's freedoms – although she added that 'too much freedom is not good either'. She believed that violence against women had decreased along with the many other customs that restricted women's behaviour, possibly because of these organisations that supported women. She cited the example of her sister who had learnt about her rights from the TV and had been able to stand up to an oppressive mother-in-law by threatening to complain to a women's rights organisation.

## 6 Microfinance as a pathway of change: expanding economic opportunities

Among the various changes associated with the international community's efforts to promote the local economy in Afghanistan is the proliferation of microfinance organisations. The availability of microfinance specifically earmarked for women is a new phenomenon in Afghanistan but there are various ways in which women's access is qualified. While both BRAC and WfW target their loans to women, both explicitly require husbands' consent. Husbands have to be present when the women join the programme; have to submit their fingerprints along with their wives'; supply photographs and house deeds, where available, or a guarantor otherwise. This both ensures that men can be held responsible for loan repayment and serves to make the policy of targeting women more acceptable to male members. The effect of these terms and conditions is to transform a purportedly 'woman's loan' into a joint or even 'male' one.

It was generally the men in our sample households who took the initiative to approach these organisations, urging their wives to take advantage of this new facility. That this was so, despite norms about female seclusion and the primacy of the male breadwinning role, is indicative of the economic pressures that the households were under in a context of high levels of male unemployment. In most cases, the loans were used to set men up in income-generating activities – a taxi business, small trade, raising poultry or livestock, purchase of a carpet weaving loom, setting up a shop or financing training to prepare sons for the labour market.

Only in a few cases had women been able to use the loan to finance an independent economic activity for themselves, sometimes after considerable negotiation with their husbands if the work entailed their presence in the public domain – such as running a bakery or their own hairdressing business. In a number of households, sons and daughters had been able to find jobs within the microfinance organisation. Pareesha's daughter had argued, successfully, with her father to be allowed to work in a BRAC office as she did not want to marry early: 'Dear father, I am not a girl, I am your oldest 'son', people don't have the right to say anything. If I don't work, I will have to marry'.

In general, the loans helped families to secure their livelihood base and diversify their livelihoods, in some cases, helping them to move up the livelihood ladder. For instance, Nadia's father shifted out of daily wage labour into his own vegetable business while the women in his family moved from carpet weaving for a contractor on a piece rate basis to working on their own loom. From the women's perspective, using their loans in this way had the benefit of helping their husbands to fulfil their breadwinning responsibilities. For Nadia, it also had the benefit of getting the men out of the house and freeing women to get on with their own work: 'It is a good thing my father is not at home. There is no one to keep saying, 'bring me my food'. When my father is at home, that is all what he wants'.

There were a number of cases where failure to use the loans productively had plunged the family into deeper debt. 'Bad' loans generally had 'bad' impacts on intra-household relations. Layla's first loan had been used to release her brother-in-law from prison as the result of an accident involving her husband's taxi. They relied on their small shop to repay the loan but had not managed and were now trying to juggle three different loans from three different organisations. Layla's husband's shouting had increased as a result of the stress he was going through leaving her to conclude that 'the loans have ruined our life'.

Naz had a similarly negative experience. One of her loans had been used to set her husband up as a money changer but he had been robbed on the way home. They were now in deep debt and not sure how to get out of it. She was in a state of constant stress about her loan repayments: 'Something you think can bring benefit for people's life has not made our life better. If we had not taken the loan, the thief would not have taken the money. My husband blames me for taking the loan'.

For the other women in our sample, access to microfinance had generally made a positive contribution to household livelihoods. However, the extent to which it had also contributed to their capacity for voice and influence varied considerably, reflecting the different ways in which their loans were controlled and utilised and the extent to which they served to expand women's sphere of social interaction and exposure to new ideas.

In Saeeda's case, access to loans appeared to have little impact, positive or negative. She had gone to BRAC for a loan on her husband's instructions and he had used the money to clear his debt and to buy a battery for his taxi. As far as she was concerned, there was little additional impact: 'My husband's problems are solved so my problems are solved'.

Parwana already had a full-time job as a security guard in a local business while her husband worked as a mechanic for an international agency. Her loans were invested by her husband in poultry and then livestock which she and her children took care of. They took turns paying off the loan: 'sometimes I pay, sometimes he does, there is no difference. This is married life'. While microfinance had clearly helped them to diversify their household livelihood base, it was her job, and what it allowed her to do, that she appeared to value most.

Naghma's evaluation of her experience was a mixed one, partly as the result of her conflictual relationship with her husband. She had taken loans on her husband's instruction. He was unemployed and the money was used to set him up in a tailoring business. As far as the loans were concerned, therefore, she saw little evidence of impact: 'There has been no difference for me. I just give the money to my husband. I don't keep a single penny for myself ... whatever I do, there is no change in his behaviour'. However, there were a number of ways in which she had benefited. One was the opportunity to make regular visits to the WfW office to pay her instalments and to discuss some of her marital problems with the women there. However, after a while, her husband forbade these visits and decided to go in her place. When the WfW staff raised objections, he decided to stop taking any more loans.

She also benefited in another way. With the expansion of her husbands' tailoring business, she began to make waistcoats for her husband for which she received payments. This was, as she acknowledged, an unusual arrangement but she explained it as a husband's contribution to meeting his wife's needs. This income had allowed her to pay for her daughter's education. As she put it, 'You know that men don't really care about girls'. Her husband had been willing to pay for their sons to go to a private school but not their daughter. So she used her 'wages' to send her daughter to school: 'I want Mahdiya to be someone, not to sit at home all day like her mother sewing clothes'.

For other women, access to microfinance had been a more unambiguously positive experience. Not only had it contributed to household goals and living standards but also had a number of impacts at the personal level. A number of them had been able to use the increased income flows into the household to achieve goals that they valued: securing the tenure of their homes, educating children, hospitality to guests, participation in social networks, capacity to pay for marriage-related expenses vital to their reputation and social standing. Children's education was one of the most important of these goals and having some income of their own allowed women to send daughters to school, something their fathers did not always prioritise.

A number of women believed that access to microfinance had increased their say in household finances, reinforced in certain cases, by their entry into paid work. Farah enjoyed the small measure of economic independence that her embroidery and carpet weaving income gave her: 'I feel happy I can buy things for myself, I have my own responsibilities, I can do embroidery, I can do carpet weaving'. Nadia's mother approved of the fact that loans were given to women:

A woman does not generally have authority, the loan gives them more authority... If men were given the money, they would work in the bazaar, they would get a job outside the house and we would not be able to weave carpets.

Safa expressed a similar viewpoint. While she agreed that it was a good idea that men had to approve their wives taking out loans because they could then be held responsible for the loans and also because women were not in possession of the relevant information; she also felt that directing the loans through women gave them some say in how the money was used. In her case, her ability to access loans had only become possible with the departure of her oppressive mother-in-law. She thanked God for her improved fortunes: 'I felt my old brain is gone and I have a new brain. Our shop is new, our home is new... Back then I could not plan for anything and I tended to forget things'. Her husband's behaviour had also changed, he was less suspicious of her going out and he contributed his earnings to the joint management of the household. He had bought Safa a mobile phone so that he did not have to worry about her when she was out.

Jamila's loans had been invested well and now she, her husband and her son were all working. They were able to offer hospitality to guests and their standing in the community had risen. Jamila believed that she had improved her position within the family:

Before I took loans, I was a housewife. Now I have control over the whole house, I didn't use to have authority, now I do. I am more respected now. My husband used to shout. Now I have a better status... He says, 'you are the *wakil* [wise woman]. You know what to do'. When we were poor, we had nothing. When he got angry, he started shouting but now he respects me a lot. The loan has not created a burden for me. If I had done it alone, I would have been anxious... Now if there is a problem, they come to me... I have peace both inside and outside my home.

Jamila's daughter supported her claim: 'my father respects my mother a lot and always tells her to sit here on the cushions, not there on the floor'.

Like some of the other women in our sample, Jamila attributed many of the impacts she had experienced at the personal level and in her relations with others to the fact that the loans were targeted to her:

If my husband had made more money without need for my loans, I would have no authority. They would keep the money. Now they give it to me. My son gives me his whole salary. Freedom means freedom to spend money. If my husband made money, he would keep it. And if he keeps it, how can I have more freedom? Now I go wherever I want and I have money. If I like something, I buy it. If the money is with the man, he won't give it for the children, he won't give it to you.

A number of women spoke of the expanded social interaction associated with their access to microfinance. Those associated with WfW spoke of their regular visits to what Nadia described as 'an office full of women, all with different stories'. Her visits to the market also brought her in contact with new ideas: 'When I go to market, I have heard that now men and

women are equal'. Farah had been taking her repayments to the WfW office every 15 days for the last four years and she enjoyed the opportunities for social interaction it had opened up:

I go out and talk to my sisters. I see different people. I get to know good people. I see their lives are good. We share our problems. I like it when I learn about people's lives. There are three of us in our loan group, my mother-in-law, my sister-in-law and myself. We get to see those other women clients. They talk about financial matters, about who is married...

For Naghma too, until she was forbidden by her husband, visits to the WfW office had provided her with people to talk to about her problems:

I know the people in the WfW office and they know me. We have a good relationship and I confide in them and I feel better. Sometimes when I went there I had a black eye or some injury, they would get very angry... I like hanging about with them – you can confide in them and talk to them. I hear strange things about family life. They share their problems.

In Jamila's case, her loan group met every Wednesday in her house. They would discuss their loans and their businesses but there would also be exchange of personal problems:

They tell their stories, they talk about their children. If it weren't for these meetings, I would not know that one of our neighbours is going crazy, she is in hospital. We meet with our cousins from our mother's side, the cousins from our father's side... they come here, we drink tea together, we talk, we confide in each other.

Others spoke of the expansions of their social interactions through the work they did. It had been Pareesha's idea to get a microfinance loan in order to open her own hairdressing business, using the skills she had learnt while in Iran. When she had first returned to Kabul with her husband, she missed the sociability of her life as a hairdresser, first in Mashhad and then in Teheran. She had a lot of customers who came to visit her regularly. When they returned to Kabul, she knew nobody: no one would even knock on their door. Once she set up her hairdressing business with her microfinance loan, she felt she had grown in self confidence as a result of her increased contacts with the outside world:

I feel comfortable, I can interact with people... The hairdressers is the best place to have a chance to talk to other women like myself. Everybody has their own problems especially because Afghan men are so cruel... Women ask me for help. My assistant had a problem with her husband who couldn't provide for her. She wanted a divorce but I advised her to get a loan.

She felt that since she became economically active in her own right, her relationship with her husband had improved:

At least we don't argue over money any more. He feels better too... There have been fewer arguments, there has been less fighting because everyone has money in their pocket. My husband still has the authority. I respect him a lot. I consult him... But now it is better – he lets me do what I want... I used to fight him because he could not provide for us. I can help him now, earn my household expenses and pay for the rent and materials... I can pay for my own expenses so the violence has reduced. I feel proud, I am not dependent, I am not asking others for money. I have a feeling of joy... My husband's behaviour changed, he is happy I am standing on my own two feet...

Sometimes he praises me as he thinks it was courageous of me to take a loan. I have the feeling of growing up and becoming a fuller person. I am no longer sitting at home. I feel like I am a man... At nights my husband asks how my day was. He gets a cushion for me. He gives me food. It is very unusual. People encourage me. They say I have done things that even men couldn't do. Women that are at home say that too. Other women who take loans give it to their husbands, but I used mine on my own business. Some might call my husband without honour, but my husband is different now that he is no longer in contact with others who influence him. Also he is proud. He tells other men to treat their wives better although he treated me wrong in the past. He gave advice to his neighbour to treat his wife with more respect.

Pareesha's husband acknowledged some of these changes. He told us that his wife sometimes used the loan money without consulting him: 'This drives me crazy and we have to bargain with each other'. It is clear that he does not always overrule her. As she put it, 'Either I win or he wins'. He feels a greater sense of confidence in the future as a result of access to microfinance:

I became a little more 'intellectual', it has changed the way I think... What I mean is that now I know that if I am faced with a problem, the loan will help me to solve it. I now believe that my life should get better, my children should go to school, my wife should work.

At the same time, he continues to see himself as having final authority in the household, a reflection of the natural order of things:

Afghanistan is a patriarchal society; whatever men say goes. Look, if you see the TV, there is a buffalo that controls all the other buffalos or a lion who controls other lions. It is necessary to have this. It is the same for human beings...

Hafiza had started her own bakery (she used to bake in her homeland) because her husband was disabled and could not work. His initial resistance faded when he saw the economic benefits of her work. He stopped beating her as she now responded by threatening not to go into work, 'He knows if he beats me, I can't bake, I would have a headache, my body would ache, I would not be able to work'. But she felt his behaviour had in any case improved over time:

There is a lot of difference. The money is mine. He is better now, he is gradually better. He has been around and seen things, he has learnt. You don't learn when you are sitting at home. He has seen people. He has seen that people work. He says, how would we be able to eat if there was not this bakery. It would be very difficult.

She felt she had the respect of her neighbours. They saw that she worked hard, 'If she was not there, this man would not be able to make a living'. She herself had grown in self-confidence. She contrasted how she had been with how she was now:

At that time, I didn't go anywhere. I didn't know where to go. I didn't know how to keep my money. I was scared I would lose it that someone would take it. I neither knew the school nor the classes nor the bazaar. Now I have learnt... Now I know my way around, I would get lost before... [now] I go around more freely.

And she valued the opportunity to mix with others, to learn about life too:

You learn stories from the bakery, for example girls should go to school. When you come from your homeland, you don't know anything. Then you learn. He has been to places too. He has learnt. It is good because people gather around you, there is money

and I don't have to beg. I hear people say, that person's wife is capable. When I go to repay the loan, I become familiar with other people. The house is full. People talk, you have to talk.

Her daughter confirmed the change in her mother, 'back then she was weak. She didn't know anything. She feels powerful now'.

## 7 Interpreting the narratives: renegotiating patriarchal contracts in an era of rapid change

In this paper we set out to explore working women's narratives about their lives in order to ascertain what they valued about the place allocated to them by society and the extent to which they sought, or welcomed, change and what these changes were. We were interested in examining how these narratives positioned women in relation to the larger debate about desirable pathways of change. We were also interested in the factors which reproduced gender inequalities in women's lives – as well as the forces for positive change. Finally, we wanted to explore the extent to which microfinance contributed to some of the changes that we observed in women's lives.

We found that women in our sample spoke of gender relations in their everyday lives in terms of the idea of an informal patriarchal contract. This spelt out a gender-differentiated discourse of rights and responsibilities between women and men within family and kinship relations which had its roots in religion and culture. Many had internalised aspects of this contract. They defined virtue in women in terms of their compliance with the wishes and expectations of dominant family members and recognising the right of husbands to beat their wives for any transgressions. In return, they expected women to be provided for, protected in times of crisis and represented in the public domain.

However, the lived reality rarely matched up to the idealised version spelt out in religious teachings and cultural codes. Instead, women's narratives about their everyday lives were dominated by their efforts to discharge their obligations as daughters, wives, mothers and daughters-in-law in the context of a disrupted economy with high levels of unemployment in which male family members were finding it hard to live up to their roles as primary breadwinners and venting their frustrations on their wives and children. Women's struggles to deal with the disjuncture between this normative model of a patriarchal contract and its concrete manifestations in their daily lives helped to spell out some of the forces of continuity and change that have characterised Afghan society in recent decades.

On the one hand, we noted the variety of pressures on women to accept their subordinate status and to put up with their situation, regardless of how they felt. The weight of tradition, the internalisation of inferiority, the fear of losing their children, of being sent back in shame to their parents' home, of being expelled from family and community combined with pressures, often backed by physical violence, from dominant members of the family and the wider religious community in reinforcing the status quo. Even someone like Naz who wished that she had the power to fight back and had told her husband she hoped 'he would die young' nevertheless told herself that she had no choice, she was a woman and had to tolerate it. For all the closeness of family ties, many of these women spoke of their loneliness, of not having anyone to confide in. The significance of shrines in their lives was

that they offered them a place where they could be themselves, where they found spiritual strength and solace that was not easy to find elsewhere in their lives.

Yet it is clear men too have found the burden of responsibility associated with their position in the household difficult to deal with in the aftermath of decades of upheaval. The stresses they have had to face can be glimpsed in their descriptions of their struggles to discharge their responsibilities. They can also be glimpsed in women's descriptions of their husbands as 'bad tempered', 'moody', 'anxious', 'tense' and even 'psychotic', although a number of women were clearly attuned to what their husbands were going through: 'poor him, he has to work from morning till night'; 'poor him, he lost his job'.

However, it was clear from their narratives that a number of women also saw many aspects of their husbands' behaviour as manifestations of a more generalised pattern of injustice, legitimated by their culture and religion, which allowed men to abuse their power over women. Pareesha explained that the reason why so many of the women who came to her shop had problems to discuss was that: 'Afghan men are cruel'. She contrasted the treatment of women in Afghanistan to what she had seen in Iran: 'Iran is really good from this point of view. You can't put pressure on women. Here they look on women as a slave'.

Parwana also spoke of both individual injustices and their structural underpinnings. She was bitter about her daily burden of work – at home, in the office and looking after the flock of sheep her husband had invested in – and of his failure to acknowledge or help her out in any way: 'I wake at 4 o'clock in the morning and I work till ten-thirty in the evening. It should not be like this in the family... No one helps out at home but one son'. She did not hold Afghan values in high regard:

In an Islamic society, women are like slaves... regardless of whatever progress Afghanistan makes, its people will still be backward. They have traditional ideas, like women are the slaves of the house. Regardless of the changes in the environment, men's way of thinking doesn't change.

Naz believed while women's roles as mothers placed them on a higher plane than men, the reality they faced was one of oppression. Others appealed to notions of justice based on their humanity: 'we are not animals'.

The critical stance taken by some of the women in our sample with regard to their own society clearly cannot be dismissed as the influence of 'Western feminist views'. These women simply did not subscribe to some monolithic notion of Afghan values: they distanced themselves from the values of the Taliban, for instance, resenting the imposition of the all-encompassing burqa on a community whose women had customarily worn the more practical chadar or simply a headscarf. They saw little wrong in women's presence in the public domain, whether it was to go to work, to school, to the market or to the shrine, if they had received permission from their husbands. Some preferred to be accompanied, if only by a child, but in one case, the possession of a mobile phone allowed the family to always know where the woman in question went.

However, their expressions of dissent and dissatisfaction did not only relate to life under the Taliban and their version of Pashtun culture but also to the unfairness of the norms and values that governed their own lives and the lives of other women in their community. They did not reject religious or cultural codes about rights and responsibilities but they felt a keen sense of injustice that violations of these codes went unnoticed, unpunished and even condoned.

This ability to take a critical stance towards their own society, to ask whether it could be organised differently, is at least in part a product of some of the changes that they have lived

through in recent years. For some, time spent as refugees in Iran had provided them an alternative vantage point from which to compare their own society. The fact that it was also an Islamic state made the comparison carry greater weight. Women felt that the very fact of having travelled, of having seen how others lived, had a profound impact not only on the women themselves but also on many of the men.

For others, the experience of life, first under the mujahidin and then the Taliban, had helped to crystallise the importance of some of the freedoms that they had previously enjoyed and which had been taken away. This might simply involve the freedom to choose how they would cover themselves or the ability to move around in the public domain with their family's consent without necessarily having also to answer to strange men. For others it was the freedom to go to work, to school, to the shrines, to have some earning power of their own rather than 'to only eat'.

The fall of the Taliban had not only restored some of these earlier freedoms but had been accompanied by other changes as well. Key among these was the emergence of a new legalistic discourse around gender equality and women's rights, actively promoted by the international community, by donor agencies and NGOs within the country and by their own aid-dependent government. Both women and men learnt about the evolving culture of women's rights from their televisions, from their forays into the public domain and from their interactions with each other. TV, in particular, has become an important vehicle for conveying competing discourses about women's place in Afghan society, both the discourses of religious leaders as well as educational programmes about women's rights and soap operas that opened the window on how women lived in other societies. Not surprisingly, TV had become a source of contention in some households. Nadia's father would not allow a TV in the house: 'there are things on TV we don't want our daughters to watch. There are bad films. Children become disrespectful'.

Some women regarded the idea of equality with men as a direct contravention of their basic beliefs: how was it possible for women to go out of the house without their husband's permission? Others appeared to welcome the emergence of the new rights discourse as a force for restraining male power and making men more accountable for their actions. They questioned the apparent monopoly that men appeared to enjoy in terms of rights and the absence of any mechanism within the traditional moral economy to restrain the misuse of their privileges. An evolving alternative jurisdiction, exemplified by the constitutional and legal recognition of gender equality, by the new national machinery for women's advancement and human rights and by the growing number of women's organisations, appeared to offer some redress to the stark inequalities of the classical patriarchal contract. It was not necessarily the case that any of the women we spoke to would actually have taken their husbands to the AIHRC but they felt that its very presence acted as a countervailing force to the power of religion and the moral community.

It is in the context of these larger changes that we need to locate women's experiences of microfinance. In an economy where large numbers of men were finding it hard to live up to their socially sanctioned roles as primary breadwinners, it is not surprising that men were often more eager than women to take advantage of loan facilities for women in order to set up various enterprises of their own. Given the resilience of patriarchal constraints on women's lives, it is not surprising that microfinance does not appear to have had any dramatic impacts on women's lives but it is important not to miss out some of the subtle shifts in agency, the almost imperceptible widening of women's sphere of social interactions, that their experience of microfinance brought about.

Extremely important for women's experience with microfinance was how productively the loans were used. For some households, it marked a slide into increasingly greater debt and heightened levels of stress for women and for their families. Others used the loans more

profitably. While only a few women set up their own enterprises, most expanded their economic contributions to their households. Along with a marked improvement in household livelihood security and standard of living, we were able to discern a number of other tangible and less tangible gains which meshed with some of the ideas about empowerment that we outlined at the start of this paper. One set of gains related to women's position within the household. The fact that women were the conduit through which the loans entered the household appeared to have increased their voice and influence in a number of households. For some women, being singled out for loans had given them a sense of efficacy: 'I am like a man'. A number spoke of the lessening of domestic violence and tensions as a result of the easing of economic pressures on men as primary breadwinners. Many believed that they were viewed with greater respect, not only by their husbands and immediate family members, but also within their local community. They were often approached for advice by other women within the community who wanted to access loans for their own families.

This relates to a second important change associated with access to microfinance which was the widening of women's sphere of interactions. In some cases, this was the result of regular meetings with women from their loan group, women who they might have known previously, but who they had no reason to interact with on a regular basis. In some cases, it was their visits to the NGO office where they met with other women like themselves with whom they shared their problems and stories. And in a few cases, these interactions occurred as a result of the expansion of their economic activity. These interactions were important because it brought home to women the fact that some of the injustices they suffered were not unique to them but common to many women and sanctioned by their culture. Through their interactions in the market place, in the public bathers, at the hairdressers and the office of their microfinance organisation, they learnt about other Muslim societies, such as Iran, in which women enjoyed greater rights and they found out that there were new laws and organisations in Afghanistan that might help to curb the excesses of male power within their own families.

For most of the women in our sample, targeting microfinance to women, with all the qualifications that organisations in Afghanistan have introduced to make it more acceptable, is a positive aspect of these programmes. Whether women handed the loans directly to their husbands or used it in some ways themselves, it gave them a degree of authority in the household that they had not had before and expanded their horizons through work opportunities and social interactions. Loans directed to men would not have had this effect.

Where we do not see much evidence of change in this group of women is in their capacity to exercise collective voice in the wider community and to act collectively to bring about change. Certainly, all of them voted and were eager to discuss the reasons for their vote. As Naghma put it, they saw their right to vote as an important recognition of their status as citizens. But none of the women spoke of coming together with others to bring about a more just society.

This may have to wait for the next generation. Certainly, they have done what they could with the meagre resources at their disposal to invest in a better future for their daughters, carving out what we might call an 'inter-generational pathway of empowerment'. As we saw, Naghma used her earnings to pay for her daughter's education so that she would be 'somebody'. Safa, whose own education was interrupted by the coming to power of the Mujahidin, said that all her efforts at home and work were to make sure her daughters went to school so that they could get decent jobs: 'There is an old saying: 'The destiny of the daughter will be the same as the destiny of the mother'. But I don't think like this. I think everyone decides their own destiny'.

Parwana said:

I want my daughter to be educated, to go to university, to get engaged and marry so that she can know the story of life. A girl should finish her education in her father's home because once she goes to her husband's home, she will not be able to study. I would like her to work. If someone is bad, they will be just as bad if they stayed at home. If someone is good, they will be good everywhere.

The accounts given by women like Jamila suggest that younger women are indeed becoming more assertive than their mothers about what they want from their lives: 'This daughter of mine is a little disobedient. She says I won't marry him if I see him and don't like him. But only to me. If she said it to her father there would be trouble'. But, as the quote below illustrates, she also sees positive changes in her sons who now admonish their father to be less authoritarian and gentler with his children.

As we noted, the survey by WfW found surprisingly high levels of optimism about the future among the women interviewed, with those who belonged to the organisation expressing greater optimism than non-members. Our research helps to explain this result, at least in relation to the Hazara women in our study. It expresses their belief that, despite the upheavals they had undergone and were still undergoing, despite the state of political instability in the country and the continued threat of the Taliban, their society was changing for the better. The greater freedom of movement, increased opportunities for work and education, the ability to vote, the setting up of a new constitution and strengthening of a legal system that promised greater equality, exposure to alternative realities through migration, TV and contacts with women's organisations, all of these gave them a greater sense of optimism, if not for themselves, then for their daughters. We hear this optimism coming through in some of their narratives:

Of course there have been changes. Now women have control over themselves. Women couldn't work, now they work in an office. Women have advanced, now they are lawyers, they are bosses... some of my uncle's daughters are doctors... they studied, they took exams. Working is not bad at all. Both men and women have to work. Women can contribute to the home... (but that is good only when women actually work and do not do anything immoral). (Saeeda)

It has got better here – men cannot assert as much pressure as before. They too have seen the world. Women have more freedom, they work in offices. It is good for a woman to go out. For Afghan women, education is best. Men should give freedom of education to women. Women should not only knit and do embroidery. Of course this is an art but the most important thing is education. Domestic violence has reduced. Men have been around and their eyes have been opened. Before boys and girls were forced to marry each other... Now they have become friends with each other and then they marry so love and kindness is built between them – that reduces violence. My son is now married. They love each other so much because they married with love... They both work so they leave home with each other and they come back in the evening. There has not been too much change in my house, my husband's way of thinking is traditional but I have to tolerate it. I have patience. God willing, if the country continues like this, the future will be better. The more people study, the better it gets. They – my daughters – are the builders of the future. Where there is education, there is progress. (Pareesha)

I think my daughter will have a better future because people are modern now. When I was young my work was very difficult... I used to graze cows and pay all the money to my father. Now my daughters have their own money. They are

literate and don't misuse their money. Before they would bribe the teacher and go and do farming. Now they are at school. (Nadia's mother)

My daughters will have a better future than me, they will have good husbands. They will have a good life. I think girls have become more aware. They have been educated. They have understood things. There have been changes. My daughters watch whatever they want to on TV. Their father's time has passed. My sons know better. My eldest son is educated. It is obvious he knows more than his father. They know the difference between right and wrong. If they continue in this way, it will be better. Sons advise their fathers, don't do this or don't do that. My eldest son tells his father, 'Don't shout, don't blame the youngest son, encourage him. Tell him if you study well, I will buy you this'. Since the fall of the Taliban, there has been a reduction in domestic violence. Men have understood that beating is bad. People have realised it is better to have good behaviour. They have learnt through TV programmes and from other people. (Jamila)

## 8 Conclusion

Returning to the debates that provide a framework for our analysis, how do these narratives speak to the different positions outlined in them? We clearly cannot attempt to claim that the views of the 12 women in our sample represent the views of Afghan women in general but we can claim that these views are unlikely to be unique or idiosyncratic in Afghan society, but one strand of thinking. In this concluding section, we want to draw out some key elements in their narrative that tell us about how they experience their lives as women, what aspects of the current social arrangements they would like to hold on to and what they would like to see changed. These elements help to position the women in our sample in relation to the larger debates.

First of all, we would argue that the idea of a patriarchal contract which is woven into much of their narratives about gender relations in the family represents in microcosm a notion of society and citizenship that is closer to the communitarian vision of mutual responsibility than the liberal one of equal rights. The women in our study see themselves as located within social networks of obligations and responsibilities, with family and kinship constituting their central core. Since these claims and obligations are themselves embedded within Afghan patriarchal kinship structures, Afghan norms and values clearly play a significant role in giving substance to these claims and obligations and providing the discourses in which they are expressed.

But we would also argue that lived realities of the men and women in our sample depart, often dramatically, from the normative prescriptions of the patriarchal contract, a departure that is almost inevitable, given the inherent gender asymmetries of family life. Women's responsibilities within the family are not only normatively enforced but also bolstered by their material dependence on male family members and the absence of any place for them in society outside the family circle<sup>6</sup> (Azarbaijani-Moghaddam 2006). Men's responsibilities, on the other hand, are not based on equivalent dependence on women. While men may depend on women to bear their children and carry out unpaid domestic and care work within the family, their position within the family and the wider society allows them far greater power, authority and resources than women to interpret familial claims and obligations on their own terms. Family life is thus characterised by relationships of highly unequal interdependence.

---

<sup>6</sup> As Azarbaijani-Moghaddam points out, in a society where all accountability is upwards to more powerful males, and sometimes females, women's biggest concern is to avoid exclusion or expulsion from the family and society and the loss of protected status that this would entail.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to expand on how women have fared in these relationships in the past, but those in our present sample did not appear to receive the reverence and respect within the domestic sphere or exercise the authority that some observers have claimed. Their contributions to the household economy went largely unrecognised until they became monetised. Male privilege remained largely intact even when men themselves were struggling to discharge their responsibilities. We noted the widespread use of violence within the family. Violence is used on a routine basis, most often by husbands against wives, but also by other dominant members over those subordinate to them. It is used to enforce obedience and punish transgressions but it also appears to be used to express the frustrations and disappointments that men in the family face in trying to live up to their expected role as family providers. The routine use of violence explains why expressions of fear appeared with regular frequency in women's narratives, fear reflecting the arbitrary use of power and authority within the households and internalised by at least one of the women in our sample as an appropriate way for wives to regard their husbands.

Women's responses to this exercise of power without any apparent accountability within the family appear to mirror some of the differing positions in larger debates about these issues. First of all, there were those women – however they appeared to be a minority in our small sample – who placed their hope in the introduction of measures within the customary structures of authority that would enforce male responsibility and hold men accountable. This was most evident in their support for Mohsini's proposal for Shia'a personal law reform. They did not question their subordinate status within the family, but they sought firmer assurance that men would honour their obligations and hence provide the protections that went with women's dependent status.

A second group of women welcomed the evolving legal apparatus as a *complement* to the traditional structures of authority within the community in holding men to account. It appeared to them that religion had given men monopoly over rights, making women's rights conditional on the consent of their husbands, but had done little to enforce the responsibilities on which male rights rested. The greater attention to women's rights within the constitution, the legal system and the newly established commission for human rights thus appeared to address a major lacuna within the customary framework of rights and responsibilities.

The third group also welcomed the emerging structure of rights and responsibilities but stressed the importance of women's rights (to balance the customary stress on women's responsibilities) along with men's responsibilities (to balance the customary stress on men's rights). While they too valued the interdependencies of family life, they spoke out forcefully against the injustices that men as individuals could perpetrate on the basis of the privileges associated with men as a group. They spoke of the need for greater equality of rights between men and women and pointed to some of the ways in which Afghan society was changing to allow for relationships that were based on mutual love and respect rather than fear and violence. Their narratives allowed the greatest scope for a more egalitarian model of gender relations in which the idea that women might have freedom to move around in the public domain, to get a job, to educate themselves and their daughters, to have a say in who they married, to visit their parents after marriage, as well as freedom from violence and the arbitrary use of power, did not appear to constitute an unacceptable violation of Afghan culture or religious piety.

To sum up therefore, the women in our sample did not experience 'Afghan culture' as a monolithic and internally coherent system that lay outside the realm of contestation but as the lived relationships of everyday life which had to be negotiated on a daily basis from highly unequal positions. There was no reason for these women to regard culture as this monolithic presence since culture has certainly not been static in Afghanistan. Successive efforts to modify and reinforce gender inequalities in the country – most recently, the manufacture of

the culture of jihad during the resistance to the Soviet invasion to galvanise fighters and win the support of Afghan society and the counter-efforts of the international community to promote universalist ideas about gender equality – provide the backdrop against ordinary men and women’s continued struggle to earn a living and bring up their children. The narratives that inform our analysis can therefore be read as the views of women participating in a larger societal transition from ‘doxa’, where only one interpretation of culture was possible, to ‘discourse’, where competing interpretations have come into view (Bourdieu 1977). It is not surprising that even within our small sample of 12 women, we find dissenting views about hegemonic interpretations of their culture, about what they value and what they would like to change.

# Appendix

**Table A1 Summary of livelihood activities**

	<b>Background</b>	<b>Livelihood activities</b>
BRAC: SAFA	Age 27, illiterate, mother of two boys and three girls. Two children are blind and study at home with tutors, others are in school. She was widowed once and remarried while in Iran.	When she was married to her first husband she would sew shawls and 'break almonds' for fuel. Before leaving for Iran, her mother-in-law used to 'work for a Panjshiri family' earning a small wage and collecting leftover food for the family to eat. Her father-in-law used to repair shoes and made a small profit. Her brother-in-law (who is now in Iran) is a drug addict and used to forcibly take money to pay for his addiction. After her return to Kabul, she sold jewellery (which she brought from Iran) to help build their house. She and her father-in-law presently run a small shop (selling household goods, foods, sweets and soft drinks). In addition to loans they invested their savings (from Iran) into the business. Her present (disabled) husband is an occasional day labourer. They receive \$60 a year from wheat cultivated by others on lands they own. They own their house and pay no rent.
BRAC: PARWANA	Age 37, secondary school graduate, seven children who are being educated at various levels.	Her husband was in the military at first. Then he acquired a contract with the Rabbani Government and the Taliban, to provide them with stationery and mobiles. The government didn't pay what they owed, so they used loans to buy chickens and sheep and sell eggs. They changed to animal husbandry and now they have more than 30 sheep and goats. She also used to work at a Finance Department for eight years. Now, her husband works for GTZ [German Cooperation] as a mechanic and she works for NDI (National Democratic Institute) as a guard.
BRAC: LAYLA	Age 35, illiterate, seven children, out of whom three daughters are tutored at home and two had to leave school due to poverty and dislocation. Three sons gave up school to work and one is a baby.	Her husband was a farmer in Ghazni. In Kabul, he worked cleaning the storm drains in the street. Then he got a job at the Ministry of Trade where he was a messenger. He bought a car from the money he saved to run a taxi. Then he became crippled so he sold the car and they rented a shop. Now he has gone to Ghazni for one month to be a daily labourer. Son works in the shop. Her husband sometimes sends money. When she came to her husband's house after marriage, she made bread, milk, and yoghurt and sometimes they sold it. She made some quilts; this work was provided by the district councillor 'wakil'. She went to an office and would take the quilts to make and they would pay her 50 AFA [\$1], or sometimes 100 AFA [\$2]. Her daughter would make carpets in Ghazni but they don't in Kabul as they are scared they will ruin them and will not be able to pay for the damage.
BRAC: JAMILA	Age 45, illiterate, four sons and four daughters all of whom have been educated up to at least secondary school, with the exception of one daughter who remains illiterate due to the Taliban's ban on girls' schooling.	Currently her eldest son is a guard in an office; second son is a mechanic in a workshop and her husband rents electric generators to people. Her sons and husband bring her almonds which they break all day long and keep the skin as 'wood' fuel for the winter. Before the loan they had a rented house, now they have two houses. Her husband used to work as a porter. They moved to Ghazni for one year then came back to Kabul. Her husband was a taxi driver and the only bread-winner for the family, six years ago. Then they started carpet weaving and bought a loom to weave carpets on and then her sons went to Pakistan and sent money from there.
BRAC: PAREESA	Age 38, educated up to sixth grade, had three sons from first marriage who are in Iran. From second marriage has one baby boy and two young sons in primary school, and two step-daughters who earn and have been educated, through secondary school.	She worked in Iran as a hairdresser and her husband made wardrobes. When she came back to Afghanistan, she went to a hairdresser's to work, but was not paid well and was cheated. Now, her husband is a taxi driver. Her step-daughter works at BRAC as a Credit Officer. She took a loan to open a hairdressing salon with her business partner, which she currently runs.
BRAC: SAEEDA	Age 50, studied to sixth grade, has two sons educated, one daughter married, three daughters in school.	Husband was truck driver, would drive goods from Mazar to Ghazni. He fell ill and daughter started weaving carpets. She shelled almonds to use the skin for fuel. Second son became a tailor and she would assist him in making trousers. Now her son works in the BRAC office. Currently, she makes quilts, with the money she earns she buys paper, pencils and socks for her daughters. People give her orders and materials and she asks around to find reasonable prices for quilts, she makes 2-4 quilts a month. Husband is now a taxi driver.

WFW: NAZ	Age 45, illiterate, oldest daughter weaves carpets, one son and one daughter in school.	Husband worked as a driver (rented vehicle), but then had an accident so he left that job. Then he became a money changer, but his money was stolen. Now he is looking to work as a driver again – meanwhile is a porter. He has health issues and is deaf. Husband's father had property which was passed on to them. She does home-based embroidery, and takes it to the shop herself. She is paid for each one she sells. Prior to doing embroidery, along with the family, she had started carpet weaving but stopped because she learnt on TV that it would damage her children's health.
WFW: FARAH	Age 24, studied up to fourth grade, two young daughters in primary school and one baby son.	Husband has a carpet shop in Kabul. She does embroidery which she takes to international organisations to sell. Father-in-law has a shop selling fruit and vegetables. Sister-in-law does tailoring. Mother cleans homes in expatriate community. Mother-in-law works in a day care centre for children of expatriate community. She did carpet weaving for seven years when she came back to Kabul.
WFW: NADIA	Age 18, unmarried, illiterate, carpet-worker.	Her family was carpet weaving in Pakistan. Now her father has a hand cart and sells vegetables. One brother sells salt and the other brother sells potatoes. Mother, sisters and one brother have a carpet business: weave carpets and make tassels for scarves.
WFW: HAFIZA	Age 35, studied three years, five daughters, two are in school.	When she came to Kabul during Taliban rule, she twisted wool for carpets. When the Taliban left she started baking. She baked for two years and then they bought their current house. She started her own bakery by taking loans. She is working as a baker, as there was no women's bakery in their neighbourhood. They have a small bakery where her husband and one of her daughters work. They have three other shops, which they rent. Previously her husband had a cart and she worked in a bakery. Recently, he started working as a daily labourer doing construction as well. Daughters come home from school and weave carpets.
WFW: NAGHMA	Age 29, somewhat literate, five children, one daughter and two sons in primary school, one daughter not studying and one baby.	Husband is a tailor (who works from home). She makes vests for her husband. Husband's income supports them and his parents who live outside of Kabul. He has a contract with large shops and produces high quality clothing. He has three female 'assistants' who work as labourers from their homes. She recently learnt how to make waistcoats so she could make more money. Previously, during the day she would go with her husband to soak the soil and in the evenings they would weave carpets.
WFW: WAFA	Age 45, widow, taking adult literacy course, three daughters and two sons, all educated up to secondary level.	Husband was a police officer, was lost during the war – she is now a widow. She used to make soup 1–2 times a week and would take it to the shops to sell it. She has also woven carpets and shelled almonds for money. More than four years ago, she knitted body cloths (to shower with) and cardigans and sold them to people and she and her daughters would also weave carpets. One son has a shoemakers shop. Another son is working as an interpreter with an international organisation.

# References

- Abirafeh, L. (2005) *Lessons from Gender-Focused International Aid in Post-Conflict Afghanistan ...Learned?*, Bonn: Friedrich Ebert Stiftung
- Abu-Lughod, L. (2002) 'Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and its Others', *American Anthropologist*, 104.3: 783–90
- Ahmed-Ghosh, H. (2006) 'Voices of Afghan Women. Human Rights and Economic Development', *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 8.1: 110–28
- (2003) 'A History of Women in Afghanistan: Lessons Learnt for the Future: Women in Afghanistan', *Journal of International Women's Studies* 4.3: 1–14
- Azarbaijani-Moghaddam, S. (2006) *Women's Groups in Afghan Civil Society. Women and Men working towards Equitable Participation in Civil Society Organizations*, Kabul: Counterpart International
- Barakat, S. and Wardell, G. (2002) 'Exploited by Whom: An Alternative Perspective on Humanitarian Assistance to Afghan Women', *Third World Quarterly* 23.5: 909–30
- Bourdieu, P. (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology Series, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Caldwell, J. C. (1978) 'A Theory of Fertility: From High Plateau to Destabilisation', *Population and Development Review* 4.4: 553–77
- Centlivres-Demont, M. (1994) 'Afghan Women in Peace, War and Exile', in M. Weiner and A. Banuazizi (eds), *The Politics of Social Transformation in Afghanistan, Iran and Pakistan*, Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press
- DFID (2008) *Understanding Afghanistan – Poverty, Gender and Social Exclusion Analysis*, London: Department for International Development
- Kabeer, N. (2008) *Paid Work, Women's Empowerment and Gender Justice: Critical Pathways of Social Change*, Pathways Working Paper 3, Brighton: IDS
- (1999) 'Resources, Agency, Achievement: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment', *Development and Change* 30.3: 435–64
- Kandiyoti, D. (2007) 'Old Dilemmas or New Challenges? The Politics of Gender and Reconstruction in Afghanistan', *Development and Change* 38.2: 169–99
- (1988) 'Bargaining with Patriarchy', *Gender and Society* 2.3: 274–90
- Minority Rights Group (n.d.) 'World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples', [www.minorityrights.org/?lid=5440](http://www.minorityrights.org/?lid=5440) (accessed 28 September 2011)
- Moghadam, V.M. (2002) 'Patriarchy, the Taleban and Politics of Public Space in Afghanistan', *Women's Studies International Forum* 25.1: 19–31
- MoWA (2008) *Women and Men in Afghanistan: Baseline Statistics on Gender*, Kabul: Ministry of Women's Affairs and United Nations Development Fund for Women

UNFEM (2006) *Uncounted and Discounted. A Secondary Data Research Project on Violence against Women in Afghanistan*, Kabul: UNFEM

Women for Women International (2009) *2009 Afghan Report. Amplifying the Voices of Women in Afghanistan*; Washington DC: Women for Women International

World Bank (2005) *National Reconstruction and Poverty Reduction: The Role of Women in Afghanistan's Future*, Washington DC: World Bank