<u>Education and Emergency: Women in post-2001 Afghanistan</u>

This paper examines the potential significance of investing in female education in the fragile and frequently violent context of post-invasion Afghanistan. Recent and chronic challenges to female education are examined through the lens of transitional priorities. The economic and social benefits promised by human capital theory and their limitations in Afghanistan are considered, alongside arguments emerging from Amartya Sen's capability approach. Beyond economics and politics however, the criterion of basic human capabilities provides a measure of the nature of the society being built – in terms of the ethical demand that no group be denied the capacity to exercise agency. In sum, this paper contends that prioritizing female access to education in transitional Afghanistan, for all the pragmatic and attitudinal obstacles, is a critical choice for the maturation of civic and economic development.

Keywords: culture, capabilities, economic, education, Islam, transition, women, girls

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"The evidence is clear that investment in education, with special effort to include girls, is the single most important investment in development that any country can make. Girls that have been to school transform their country as they grow up. They tend to marry later and have fewer children who are more likely to be healthy. They help increase household income and in turn they insist on access to education and health care for their own children."
–Government of Afghanistan (Securing Afghanistan's Future 2004 in World Bank 2005:31)

"If the people of the world want to solve the hard problems in Afghanistan – kidnapping, beheadings, crime and even al-Qaeda – they should invest in [our] education."
–Ghulam Hazrat Tanha, Director of Education, Herat (in Baker, 2008:1).

Afghanistan, torn by decades of war and internal lawlessness, is still a largely rural society in which women's lives are constrained by poverty, patriarchal family units and cultural codes. A sensitive subject for development work at best, attempts to initiate change in the wake of the US-led 2001 invasion are even more vulnerable to arguments from those inclined to resist such changes as essentially driven by foreign ideology and values which will destroy the social and cultural structures that comprise identity. Again, among western secular elites, the adoption of the "clash of civilisations" thesis (Huntington 1996) has fuelled a neo-conservative agenda of cultural and political reconstruction in which Islam is seen as largely inimical to modernity and human freedom.

The discourse on women's education in Afghanistan is pervasive. While the idea may seem unifying, different actors have divergent reasons for prioritising it, and offer varied definitions of what it means and how it should be delivered. For the Bush administration, women's rights and education were positive sound bites in the wake of the 2001 invasion, but clearly not one of its underlying motivations – despite claims to the contrary (Shaheed 2003, Mamdani 2004). The proliferation of international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) that have followed in its wake are oriented toward the Education for All (EFA) program, and the Millennium Development Goals – with their target of universal primary education by 2015.

The focus on EFA amongst INGOs and governments has led to increased use of mechanisms such as the Gender-related Development Index (GDI) and the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) for measuring female enrolment in primary school upwards, and the effect of education on their socio-economic status and wellbeing (UNDP, 2008). The influence that INGOs can exert in impoverished countries through the provision of aid for programs and initiatives compatible with these goals is considerable. Indeed, the growing collaboration of international organisations around certain targets and agendas has been described by some as generating an international development "regime" (Mundy 1998, 2006:25), imposing priorities on developing countries through the provision of conditional expertise and funding. This often results in treating such countries as objects of an external development process rather than significant actors in shaping future goals (Chan 2007). The focus on women and their education is inexorably freighted with political and cultural tensions: their roles are often integral to basic structures of domestic and social order, fortified by claims of tradition,

identity and morality. A misreading of the nature of the challenges facing female education may actually worsen the conditions under which it is practiced.

The mere fact that women's development is in vogue in international establishments will not suffice to make the education of girls a priority in Afghanistan, where resources are scarce and security even scarcer. Indeed, the role and education of women has a volatile, politicised history in Afghanistan throughout the twentieth century, as various rulers and governments attempted to enforce change (Emadi 2002). Why, when other needs are so acute and the political situation so precarious, should the education of girls be a priority during this period – as the government itself strives for legitimacy, and girls heading to school invite attacks from Taliban insurgents (Khan and Voigt, 2008)? The Government of Afghanistan's 2004 "Securing Afghanistan's Future" report shows that female education does receive policy emphasis (2004:13). Yet the benefits described in that document, jointly framed with the World Bank and UNDP, among others, mirror dominant international perspectives and are an unreliable guide to domestic political will.

This paper will critically assess claims about the benefits and challenges of female education in Afghanistan today. In appraising the value of female education in Afghanistan's current transitional context, this paper will examine economic and social arguments. The implications of failing to implement female education are more relevant than ever, as support for international involvement flags and pressure builds for an expedient exit strategy.

Demographic and Policy Context

The current challenges facing Afghanistan's educational system and the deprivation of Afghan girls and women are the product of several decades of conflict. In order to grasp the issues, some introduction to this history is necessary. Afghanistan is divided into 34 provinces. Its peoples are a diverse mix of over fifty ethnic groups: the largest being Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, and Uzbeks (Eyanabeke 2004). While Islam is the national religion, there are sharp sectarian divisions, which may help explain in part the different attitudes toward education demonstrated by the Sunni (largely Pashtun) population of the southern provinces, and the Shi'i groups, including Hazaras and Tajiks, concentrated in the north. The variations in security, population, and education among provinces are marked, and therefore general statements about Afghanistan must always be qualified. However, years of war during and after the Soviet period (1979-1989), followed by the ascent of the Taliban in 1994, and the US-led invasion of 2001, have left educational infrastructure everywhere – both human and physical – in ruins. The country is now facing an insurgency, drought, and a controversial foreign presence.

AFGHANISTAN'S POPULATION

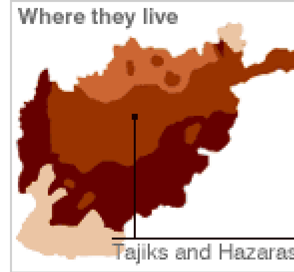
Others (Turkmen, Aimaq, Baluch, Nuristani, Kizilibash): 13%

Hazara: 9%
Origin: Mongol
Language: Dari
Religion: Shia Muslim
Live in: Central highlands

Uzbek: 9%
Origin: Turkish descent
Language: Uzbek
Religion: Sunni Muslim
Live in: Plains north of the Hindu Kush

Pashtun: 42%
Origin: Claim descent from ancient Hebrews
Language: Pashto
Religion: Sunni Muslim
Live in: South and east of the country

Tajik: 27%
Origin: Persian descent
Language: Dari
Religion: Sunni Muslims
Live in: Northern Afghanistan, near Iran

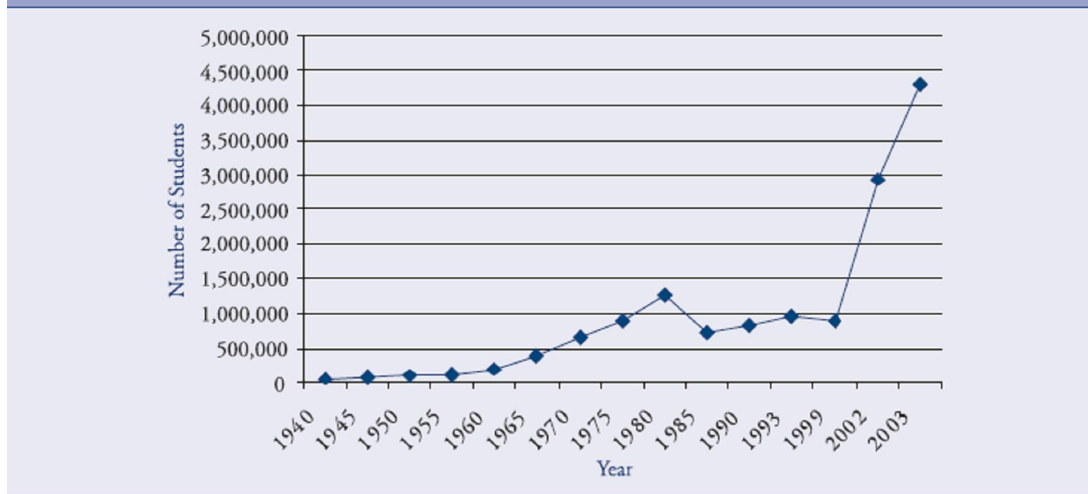


Population: 32.7 million
Population growth: 2.6%
Main languages: Pashto and Dari
Religion: Islam (majority Sunni)

SOURCE: CIA World Factbook 2008, UNDP

Female education has frequently been a highly politicised issue, often with deleterious effects (Ahmed-Ghosh 2003). However, the Afghan government has publicly recognised the economic necessity of female education for national development (Government Report, 2004; National Development Strategy, 2006). In accordance with EFA goals, the Afghan government initiated the Back to School Campaign in 2002, targeting primary enrolment, followed by emphasis on secondary enrolment in 2003. The results were astonishing – the highest ever recorded enrolment figures for both genders.

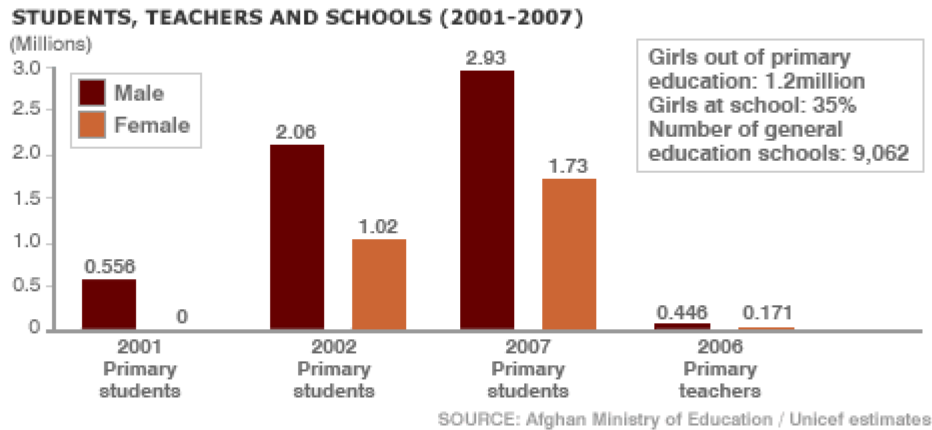
Figure 1: The Growth of Student Enrollment: Grades 1-12 (1940-2003)



Source: World Bank, 2004b ,Technical Annex, p. 5

Between 1999 and 2002 approximately 1,000,000 children were enrolled. In 2003 over 4,000,000 were on record, including 35% of school-aged females (World Bank 2005:33-34). As the figure below shows, enrolment has continued to climb. However, these gross figures do not reveal the disparity among provinces and urban / rural areas. Further, there is a sharp decline from primary to secondary female enrolment**:** girls comprise only

5% of all pupils in rural areas. With 75% of the population living outside urban zones, this is a serious disparity (NESP, 2007). Even post-2001, Afghanistan's average number of school years for girls is the lowest in South Asia at less than a year, trailing Bangladesh's 1.8 years (World Bank 2005:34). What accounts for these figures?



Challenges

The barriers to primary education facing Afghan girls are many. Because there are not enough schools, distance is a major problem, especially outside cities, as parents are reluctant to allow their daughters to walk long distances outside the village or use public transport. Even when distance is not an issue, school facilities are very poor: only 15% are equipped with water and toilet facilities (World Bank, 2005:42). Those schools are the better ones; while 3,500 schools have been opened since 2002, less than 50% have buildings, resorting instead to tents or open spaces. The lack of sanitation facilities and absence of protection from male view is a serious barrier to female attendance, especially at the secondary level (Baker, 2008). Many state schools employ male teachers from outside the communities they serve, which can pose issues of trust (Kirk and Winthrop, 2006). In addition, of the insufficient number of schools that Afghanistan has, only 49% admit girls at some level. This is due to concerns about mixed-gender classrooms. Boys are admissible in 86% of schools, revealing that female access is severely constrained at the formal level as well (Human Rights Watch, 2006:27).

Another issue related to concerns about co-ed classrooms is the shortage of female teachers. Of the total number of teachers, only 28% are female and unsurprisingly they are concentrated in urban areas (NESP, 2007:11). The Afghan government has made primary and secondary education free, but the cost of uniforms and stationary can be a challenge in poor rural areas (World Bank 2005), to which the opportunity cost must be added. As the expectation in many of these areas is for girls to marry at a very young age (seventeen is the average)(MICS, 2003), the value of formal education may seem dubious – or even dangerous**.** Nonetheless, while reservations about female education do exist, it is important to recognise that in many cases the reluctance is conditional, and variations between communities and regions can be dramatic.

A major barrier to access is lack of security, most acute in the southern provinces where the Taliban insurgency is strongest. In 2007 alone there were over 228 recorded attacks, with 200 schools closed in five provinces. A government report in April that year stated that nearly 6% of schools had been closed due to terrorism in the past 18 months

(NESP 2007:11). The number of reported attacks in 2008 was 292 (UNAMA 2009:3). Even when initial enrolment rates are promising, there is a high incidence of drop-out, especially among girls. According to the Afghan government's National Strategic Plan for Education (2007:29), "at the primary level boys' enrolment is nearly twice that of girls, while at the lower secondary level it is three times higher and at the higher secondary level boys are almost four times more likely than girls to be enrolled." Reasons for this, apart from security threats, may include the perceived irrelevance of the curriculum material, poor quality of teachers – many of whom have not completed high school (NESP 2007) – and inability to progress, often due to malnourishment or other demands on students' attention, including work at home or elsewhere (World Bank 2005)(IRIN 2008). Also, given the lack of economic opportunities available to young women, the value of investing in education may seem negligible – a point to which we will return.

Afghanistan is currently struggling to finance its education system amid multiple competing priorities. Fighting the insurgency, corruption at all levels of government and society (Barker, 2008), and curbing the cultivation of and market for poppies are a significant drain on resources. The sensitivity and violence around female education might suggest that it would be pragmatic to avoid making it a primary focus until the situation becomes more stable (Ottaway and Lievan 2002 in Wylie 2003). This is particularly the case in the south, where girls' schools have been the subject of a targeted campaign of intimidation, which has led to the closure and destruction of hundreds of schools (Human Rights Watch 2006). The need to appease various factions, including former *mujahideen*, warlords, and the Taliban creates constant tension over the status – and control – of women. Their rights are vulnerable to being bargained away for security and the cooperation of powerful parties (Kandiyoti 2009). However, failing to take decisive measures to improve the status of women may undermine the very stability that reconstruction policies attempt to secure.

Lessons from International Civil Conflict

Understanding the challenges to female education in Afghanistan is improved by a consideration of the features which it shares with other post-conflict settings, and the approaches which have been usefully adopted elsewhere. In her paper "Women in Contexts of Crisis: Gender and Conflict" Jackie Kirk points out that "War lays bare the gender dynamics of societies, and of education systems, and the particular vulnerabilities of girls. As conflict makes living conditions more difficult, dangerous and uncertain, tentative educational and other rights-based gains made by women may be reversed" (2003:6). The weak enforcement of law and provision of security often results in levels of violence and lawlessness that tend to affect women and girls directly. Kirk observes that security while commuting to school has been a problem in Northern Uganda, Rwanda, and Kosovo, as has sexual harassment by male teachers in West Africa (2003). Physical security is directly related to female attendance.

In resource-strained circumstances, girls are often the first to drop out of school in order to assist their families with labor at home, to replace or care for injured (or absent) family members. Early marriage of girls is also a practice that occurs in unstable situations- such as Northern Uganda and Somalia, and is frequently a measure taken when the physical security of the girl or her family is at stake, or poverty is desperate

(Kirk 2003). These comparisons reveal that some of the barriers to educating girls in Afghanistan are not specifically Afghan – nor are they rooted in some peculiarly changeless culture. Rather, they are the outcome of decades of violence, which have stripped away the gains women made in Afghan society under progressive governments (Emadi 2002), and reinforced conflict-specific patterns of behavior which disadvantage women.

Deniz Kandiyoti argues "what to Western eyes looks like 'tradition' is, in many instances, the manifestation of new and more brutal forms of subjugation of the weak made possible by a commodified criminal economy, total lack of security and the erosion of bonds of trust and solidarity that were tested to the limit by war, social upheaval and poverty" (2009:9). Other scholars have made similar statements, tracking the radicalization of certain Afghan groups directly to U.S.-funded religious and military training, a process which began in 1979 and continued at least to 1992 (Mamdani 2004, Lindisfarne in Kandiyoti 2009).

In the realm of education, much has been said about textbooks funded by USAID and printed by the University of Nebraska for children in primary school with math questions involving the slaughter of Russian soldiers by *mujahideen* (Mamdani 2004). These are still available, and have contributed directly to the brutalization of young Afghan students. The reality of US participation in fomenting and supporting the rise of radical groups, which were then unleashed in Afghanistan, raises unpleasant questions about the motivations for labeling the resulting social chaos a product of "Afghan culture".

Johan Galtung (1996 in Kagawa 2005) has separated violence into three categories: direct, indirect, and cultural. The last involves "those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence – exemplified by religion, ideology, language and art, empirical science and formal science (logic, mathematics) – that can be used to justify or legitimize direct or structural violence" (1996:196). It is true that religious vocabulary and symbols have been invoked in Afghanistan to justify constraints at the domestic, community, and national levels on the status and wellbeing of women. But this recognition does not negate the role of decades of conflict in changing the social structures and behaviors of communities, which may be rationalized in various vocabularies by the aggressors. In Afghanistan it is less "cultural violence" than *cultures of violence* shaped by this history which has created such adverse conditions for women and, as a result, for the country.

Economics of Education

In light of these factors, attempts to encourage the education of girls face special challenges. One of the dominant perspectives in international development, Human Capital Theory, stresses the economic benefits of female education for the individual, the community, and the national economy. Yet barriers to females earning income outside the home persist, whether for patriarchal reasons or safety concerns (Kandiyoti 2005). Rug weaving and handicrafts, in addition to agricultural activities have been traditional outlets of economic participation for women, none of which are perceived to be much affected by education. Currently, only 38.2% of women are active in the formal economy (UNIFEM 2008).

In such an environment, even well-educated women may have great difficulty in finding employment. Even if hired, patriarchal biases regarding the ability or worth of female employees affect rates of remuneration quite independent of the productivity or merit demonstrated by employees; Afghan women often earn half or less than men for comparable work (World Bank 2005). Among the limited range of jobs open to women, wages for teachers (where women are urgently needed) remain very low (Baker 2008), making the expected return on education often insufficient to justify the risks and loss of domestic labour. Thus parents who can afford to invest in only one child quite rationally educate their sons.

However, practices of female exclusion frequently give way to economic demand, as can be readily observed in Bangladesh and India among the poorest classes (Mazumdar and Sharma 1990; Kabeer 1994). Whether or not women gain access to gainful employment outside the home depends not only on economic need, but also on the economic returns this compromise is likely to produce. As Mohammad Atmar, the former Minister of Education notes, the sight of female doctors is and has been the most effective way to change community perceptions about the value of educating young girls (World Bank 2006).

Even in the agricultural sector – which currently accounts for 67% of labour in Afghanistan and in which women are highly active – the economic returns of education are appreciable (Appiah and McMahon 2002). The World Bank estimates that Afghanistan needs a 9% growth rate over the next 12 years to achieve meaningful recovery and quality of life (World Bank 2005); agriculture must play a vital role. Again, the question is whether the country can afford *not* to have urgent and extensive female education.

While the direct economic returns of education may be less generous for women in Afghanistan than elsewhere, the non-economic "externalities" of education have economic implications. Paul Schultz refers to these as "social benefits" and they strongly favour investment in female education because of the economic returns they imply (Schultz 2001:11-12). The economic benefits of the reduced fertility rates linked to female education (Schultz 2001), particularly in Afghanistan where the average birth rate in 2004 was 7.4 children (UNIFEM 2008) are obvious, but the effects are greater than this. According to a number of studies (Appiah and McMahon 2002; Schultz 2001; World Bank 2008), increased education among women who become mothers has a direct impact on children, associated with decreasing infant mortality, better nutrition, earlier entry into school, and more time spent in school. These effects are much greater when the mother is educated than when similar investments are made in the father (Schultz 2001).

Education increases the likelihood that a woman will have control of some portion of family resources. Many studies have been done to show that when women in impoverished communities have access to money they generally tend to spend it in the interests of the family with direct nutritional benefits for children, whereas men may tend to spend more on themselves (Senauer 1990; Schultz 2001; Kabeer 1994). Furthermore participation in civil society and engagement with democracy and human rights also improve (Appiah and McMahon 2002). Of course, these behaviours have spill-over effects.

Clearly, investing in female education significantly multiplies the social returns produced. While it seems unavoidable that educated Afghan girls will not automatically see economic returns which reflect the full value of their labour, if they remain uneducated there will be no increase in income at all. Furthermore, their continuing absence from the marketplace will only reinforce stereotypes of female inability, and the normative role of the domestic sphere. Apart from direct economic returns, the widespread presence of uneducated mothers has a deleterious effect on the health, education and wellbeing of all future Afghan children, boys and girls alike - which has economic implications.

To address the continued marginalisation of women, and the economic and social losses this represents, the family cost/benefit balance must be altered. It is something of a chicken-and-egg dilemma in that better economic opportunities for women are unlikely to emerge unless there are educated candidates, but motivation to educate them will be low without demonstrable economic benefits. To address this, special family incentives for female education may be necessary, accompanied by a hiring campaign designed to create well-publicised opportunities for women. Studies suggest that female education is the best investment a country can make (Temple 2001); yet in order to succeed it must become common knowledge that it is also a good investment for families to make.

Consequences of Exclusion

Education is affirmed as a human right (Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948, Article 26) alongside many others, including life, liberty, security of person (Article 3) and freedom from torture and inhuman treatment (Article 5). It is also acknowledged as a civil right in the Afghan Constitution (2004, Article 43). Nevertheless, it has often been viewed more as a public service, which governments are obligated to provide, but slightly less urgently that the basics of life. What is sometimes missed is that the provision of education is integral to the security and realisation of such 'basic' human rights. A woman who cannot read will have little chance of understanding the rights guaranteed her in the Afghan Constitution. She will have even less chance of seeking recourse when they are violated.

Naila Kabeer observes that the bargaining power a woman has within the household is directly related to her "perceived contribution" and the extent of her dependence on the family unit. A woman's "perceived contribution" is generally low if it is not monetary. A lack of access to money not only devalues her position, but also means that she frequently has no option but to acquiesce in decisions by male family members, including those which disadvantage herself and her children (Kabeer 1997). Her vulnerability to abuse is directly related to her perceived economic value. This is corroborated by the fact that access to independent income, employment, and extra-household networks influence female mortality rates (Sen 1992).

The maternal mortality rate in Afghanistan remains among the highest in the world, as is the mortality rate for children under the age of five (WHO 2008). This is due to poverty and a lack of access to resources and information. The education of women can positively address all three issues, improving access to information and increasing the number of female health practitioners. Denying women access to education is in fact a life and death issue. It creates problems which affect entire families, communities, and ultimately the country which emerges from political transition.

It is critical that women participate in the negotiations and legislation of the new Afghanistan. This is of course nearly impossible when they are uneducated. When women are absent from government, it is improbable that their particular needs and concerns will be well addressed. Instead, laws which legalise their ongoing disadvantage are the likely result. A recent example of this the so-called "rape law": religiously labelled legislation intended to win support for President Hamid Karzai from powerful Shi'a interest groups in the 2009 elections. The law required women to assent to the sexual advances of their husbands (Article 132), request their permission before leaving the home (Article 133) (Gebauer and Najafizada 2009), and assigned child custody to male relatives only (Boone 2009).

Religion and the Provision of Education

While stereotypes of "repressive Islam" abound, nowhere more than in discussions of Afghanistan, the truth is much more complicated. Islam is a faith with many traditions, some of them attached by culture more than principle. It is understood and practiced many ways. This diversity of interpretation and voices is observable within Afghanistan itself. Shi'i Hazara communities in Bamian province, which has a female governor, have begun to employ women as drivers and even police officers (Gall, 2008), seeing no inherent conflict between female education/employment and religious beliefs. Some parents in Pashtun-majority Khost and Ghazni provinces seem to oppose having their daughters taught by male teachers, but recent NGO work reveals that the apparently gender-based objection is often rooted in issues of trust, and may disappear if the teacher is supplied from within the community (Balwanz, 2007 and Kirk, 2006). The success of the CARE home-based school programs in these provinces is due to the direct involvement of the communities in the provision and delivery of education, and has meant sensitivity to including religious subjects in the curriculum (Balwanz, 2007). Even the conservative assertion of a supposedly timeless patriarchal Islam in these areas turns out to be malleable. These gender-defined interpretations and practices developed in response to particular recent circumstances, and have been more expressions of political resistance or responses to extremely violent and unstable circumstances than assertions of piety (Vaux 2002 in Wylie 2003; Kandiyoti 2005). Education efforts have been most successful when they collaborate with local religious and community leaders, and demonstrate respect for religious values (Oates 2007, Yacoobi 2008).

Attempts to devalue religion in Afghanistan will only support the claims of cultural critics and Taliban alike – namely, that development does intend to insert a foreign agenda or model of society. The wave of violent attacks unleashed on Afghan schools and teachers by the Taliban since 2005 has often been accompanied by accusations of complicity with anti-Islamic western agendas (Human Rights Watch 2006). As Amartya Sen notes, "Misdiagnosis of what is 'Western' . . . can take a heavy toll by undermining the support for democracy or liberty in the non-Western world" (2006:92) and, it might be added, women's education and freedom in Afghanistan. Richard Falk argues that "to be effective at local and community levels, the imposition of a universal must be by way of an opening in the culture itself, not by external imposition on the culture" (1990:49). This means that efforts to support female education in Afghanistan must not create an opposition between (secular) education and capabilities and the religious values of communities. Rather, universal goods must be expressed in

the vernacular. As Martha Nussbaum points out, "ceding religion's moral authority and all its energy of symbol and metaphor to the side of patriarchy . . . the secularist further compromises her own political goals" (2000:179).

Conclusion

The robust response to the Afghan government's literacy drive in 2002 reveals the extent of the demand for education – including female education – in Afghanistan. Despite security threats, poverty, and uncertain economic opportunities, girls are being sent to school. There are many Afghan NGOs devoted to promoting women's rights and girls' education (Povey 2003). While security remains an urgent issue, female education (and equality) is clearly not merely the goal of international organisations.

Even in the context of Afghanistan's impoverished post-war reconstruction, investing in female education makes sense. From a primarily economic perspective the increase in human capital it will create, together with the social by-products of an educated population, is Afghanistan's best hope for rebuilding its shattered infrastructure. The legitimacy of democratic government itself rests on an educated population, capable of informed consent. Beyond economics and politics however, the concept of basic human capabilities provides a measure of the nature of the society being built – and an ethical demand that no group be denied the capacity to exercise agency. The aspirations of Afghan girls and women, expressed in the courage to teach in, support, and attend schools despite the violence intended to dissuade them (Filkins 2009) is compelling evidence of what they value. Making their access to education a priority, especially in this unstable transitional phase, is the strongest investment Afghanistan can make in its own future – for male and female citizens alike.

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