

An aerial photograph of a river valley in Afghanistan. The river flows through a valley with terraced fields and small settlements. The surrounding hills are rocky and sparsely vegetated.

THE EU'S ENGAGEMENT IN AFGHANISTAN FROM A GENDER PERSPECTIVE

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A faint, light-colored world map is visible in the background of the bottom section of the cover.

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Abstract

The year 2014 is a historical year for Afghanistan. The international forces will withdraw from Afghanistan by the end of the year and for the first time in its history, Afghanistan will see a democratic transfer of power from one elected president to another. After more than a decade of international presence in Afghanistan, the situation remains fragile and although women are guaranteed equal rights under the constitution, they continue to face social, legal, political and economic barriers and exclusion.

This briefing paper addresses the situation of women in Afghanistan, focusing on the EU's engagement in Afghanistan from a gender sensitive perspective. Despite the fact that the EU is one of the major donors of development and humanitarian assistance, and that its engagement in Afghanistan is based on its shared values and norms, its influence remains predominantly declaratory and has not yet translated into real political influence yet, thus compromising the EU's commitment to integrate and mainstream a gender perspective into its development programmes and its foreign policy. Assessing the performance of the EU and the international community in Afghanistan, it becomes obvious that all too often gender sensitive and inclusive obligations and commitments compete with political pragmatism and short-term political gains. This situation indicates an existing gap between the rhetorical commitments and the operational practice.

This paper expresses the views of the author and not the views of the European Institute for Asian Studies.

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1. Introduction – Women’s rights in Afghanistan pre-9/11

Inspired by the events in the Islamic world during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, king Amanullah’s rule (1919-1929) was shaped by the vision of a modern Afghanistan. His modernisation and reform project included also the improvement of the legal and social position of Afghan women.² His rather authoritarian, top-down approach encountered opposition among traditional tribal leaders, mainly afraid of losing power and influence within society. In the following decades several other attempts were considered aiming also to improve the political, social and legal situation of women. Particularly in the urban environment, the visibility of women increased and women gained increasingly more access to healthcare, education and work. However, in the rural areas, the tribal social and power structure and system remained almost unchanged.³

Towards the end of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, a far-reaching restructuring process, based on the communist ideas of legal equality and a just social order, was initiated first under the auspice of the People’s Democratic Party (*Khalq*) and then under the Soviet occupation. Again, only a small segment of urban women were able to benefit from this modernisation drive, in fact, as in previous attempts, the reforms faced resistance. The mujahadeen used Islam as a powerful ideological antidote in the war against the communists from 1979 until 1989.⁴ They opposed the atheistic-communist ideal by promoting an Islamic counter-concept. Therefore, they cultivated and implemented an “authentic” Islamic gender arrangement.⁵

Soon after the mujahadeen proclaimed an Islamic state in 1992, civil war raged among various factions in Afghanistan. The on-going violence in Afghanistan had negative impacts on the social, legal and political security and stability and consequently influenced the situation of women. During that period women were systematically raped, forced to marry and tortured; furthermore the mujahadeen introduced restrictive laws against them. Women’s mobility, freedom and access to education, work and resources were restricted and the absence of the male breadwinner (due to the war or emigration) forced women into poverty. Many Afghans fled into neighbouring countries, where they lived in refugee camps.⁶

When the Taliban took control in 1996, they maintained, even worsened, the system of draconic oppression, deprivation and suffering. Under the rule of the Taliban women were stripped of their basic human rights and strict edicts were imposed, including a ban on women working outside their homes, a ban on women leaving the house unless accompanied by a male relative (*mahram*), a ban on women being treated by male doctors, and forcing women to wear the burqa, to name a few. These new orders and restrictions

² King Amanullah announced the introduction of a constitution based on the Turkish model of laicism under Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Important reforms were, inter alia, the codification of citizen rights, the ban on slavery, the compulsory schooling.

³ Schetter, C. (2007). *Kleine Geschichte Afghanistans*. München: Beckische Reihe.

⁴ A mujahad is one who strives or struggles on behalf of Islam. The warriors in Afghanistan termed themselves mujahadeen and different armed opposition groups existed.

⁵ Kreile, R. (2010). *Fragil und umkämpft - Frauenrechte im neuen Afghanistan*. Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung Dossier Afghanistan. Retrieved from <http://www.bpb.de/apuz/32737/fragil-und-umkaempft-frauenrechte-im-neuen-afghanistan?p=all>

⁶ Kühn, F. (2010). *Sicherheit und Entwicklung in der Weltgesellschaft. Liberales Paradigma und Statebuilding in Afghanistan*. Wiesbaden: VS Verlag.

Farrell, A. and McDermott, P. (2005). Claiming Afghan Women. The Challenge of Human Rights Discourse for Transnational Feminism. In: Hesford, W. S. and Kozol, W. (Eds), *Just Advocacy? Women’s Human Rights, Transnational Feminism, and the Politics of Representation*. London: Rutgers University Press, p. 39.

affected not only women, but society as a whole. The Taliban banned free access to music, films and television, and men had to follow an "authentic" Islamic dress code.⁷

Despite the repression, suppression and suffocating political atmosphere, Afghan women inside and outside the country never stopped fighting for human rights and social justice. They established secret schools for girls, smuggled books and other goods under their burqa, documented abuses by the Taliban and the mujahadeen and made them internationally public to gain external attention for the plight of Afghan women.⁸ Before, during and after the Taliban regime, despite the repressive situation, the possibilities and capacities to act, the needs, interests and feelings of Afghan women haven been and still are complex and diverse.

2. Women as a driving force for the intervention post-9/11

Prior to 9/11, and despite the numerous awareness-rising activities and lobbying campaigns carried out by Afghan and international women rights activists, the international community's reaction to the abusive treatment of women by the Taliban and warlords, was either indifferent or limited to rhetorical condemnation, unable to influence the discriminatory and misogynistic attitude towards women.⁹ In the aftermath of 9/11 the plights of Afghan women came into the spotlight of the international community and gained high priority in the political rationales. Following the lead of the George W. Bush administration, the international community embedded women's rights as a driving force for their engagement in Afghanistan, aiming to mobilise the public opinion in favour of the forthcoming military intervention. A broad media campaign was launched focusing on women's rights in Afghanistan. First Lady Laura Bush became an integral part of this campaign and she said during her famous radio address on 17 November 2001: "Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their home ... The fights against terrorism is also a fight for women's rights and dignity of women".¹⁰

Hyper-visualising the victimisation of women generated in the American public opinion the logic of the masculine role of protector, which evoked the perception of Afghan women as in need of being saved from the barbaric, misogynist and oppressive treatment imposed by the Taliban and al-Qaeda. Several feminist scholars have argued, that this kind of discourse has provided a moral and humanitarian intention to the American intervention, trying to mitigate its "imperialistic" geo-political ground.¹¹ Therefore, hard military initiatives were underpinned with soft humanitarian, and feminised, concerns. Krista Hunt coined the term "embedded feminism" to describe the inclusion of women rights or "feminist discourse" in the political rationales in order to legitimise the military engagement in Afghanistan.¹² Women, mostly suggested and represented as a homogenous group – simply as victims of

⁷ Ahmed-Gosh, H. (2003). A History of women in Afghanistan: Lessons learnt for the future or yesterday and tomorrow: Women in Afghanistan in *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 4(3), pp. 1-14.

⁸ Farrell and McDermott, Claiming Afghan Women. The Challenge of Human Rights Discourse for Transnational Feminism.

⁹ Ahmed, A History of women in Afghanistan: Lessons learnt for the future or yesterday and tomorrow: Women in Afghanistan in *Journal of International Women's Studies*, pp. 1-14

¹⁰ Bush, L. (2001, November 17). Radio Address by Laura Bush. *The White House Press Office*. Retrieved from <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/11/20011117.html>

¹¹ See Russo, A. (2006). The Feminist Majority Foundation's Campaign to Stop Gender Apartheid. The Intersections of Feminism and Imperialism in the United States in *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 8(4), pp. 557-580; Hunt, K. and Rygiel, K. (2008) (Eds.). (En) Gendering the War on Terror. War Stories and Camouflaged Politics. Hampshire: Ashgate eBooks.

¹² Hunt and Rygiel, (En) Gendering the War on Terror. War Stories and Camouflaged Politics.

the regime while ignoring their important role as teachers, smugglers, breadwinners and activists within and outside Afghanistan – were portrayed as a symbol of change and progress in Afghanistan, to explicit the difference between the Taliban and post-Taliban situation. The burqa became the symbol of women’s oppression and of the systematic “gender apartheid” in Afghanistan. The Feminist Majority Foundation, one of the most influential American women organisations, launched the campaign “Against Gender Apartheid in Afghanistan” in 1997. They addressed the burqa as the symbol of women’s oppression and backwardness of the Taliban regime, characterisation of the “Otherness”, imprisonment, exclusion, invisibility of women (dehumanisation) and stigmatisation of the female body. Nevertheless, the burqa can be seen as well as “mobile homes” within the specific social and cultural context, and be understood as a liberating invention, because it enables women to move out of segregating living environment while still observing the basic cultural and social requirements.¹³ Women’s liberation, modernisation and the restoration of peace and freedom in Afghanistan were equated with unveiling.¹⁴ This reductionist view of women as victims of the oppressive Taliban system ignored the historical, cultural and social context of Afghanistan and failed to address the structural causes of gender inequalities, such as unequal access to resources, education, rights, healthcare, decision-making positions and opportunities.

The acknowledgment of the gendered dimension of conflict and post-conflict reconstruction, and the linking of women’s equality and empowerment to peaceful and prosperous societies is theoretically a crucial step for a more gender sensitive and inclusive policy towards fragile states, such as Afghanistan. It also demonstrates the mainstreaming of ideas, language and issues of women movements and feminist activists into the rhetoric, commitments and even government policies. These commitments to gender equality, women’s rights and women’s empowerment are enshrined and institutionalised in international instruments, agreements and declarations, as the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (1979), the Beijing Platform of Action (1995) and the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325.¹⁵ In reality, gender is all too often appropriated, co-opted and exploited with the result that gender issues become politicised rather than systematically diffused through political, diplomatic and development efforts. This creates a gap between rhetoric and reality.

3. Gender policy in Afghanistan

After the fall of the Taliban, in December 2001, different political groups and members of the international community met under the UN auspices at Petersberg, near Bonn, to negotiate the re-building of post-war Afghanistan. The conference aimed at laying the foundation for a peaceful, pluralistic, gender-sensitive and democratic Afghanistan. During the last 13 years this genuine commitment to women’s rights and gender equality became embedded in several national and international documents and was formally guaranteed

¹³ Russo, *The Feminist Majority Foundation’s Campaign to Stop Gender Apartheid. The Intersections of Feminism and Imperialism in the United States in International Feminist Journal of Politics*, pp. 557-580.

Abu-Lughod, L. (September 2002). Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving? Anthropological Reflections on Cultural Relativism and Its Others in *American Anthropologist*, 104(3), pp. 783-780.

¹⁴ Throughout history, for example in Iran or Central Asia during the 20th century, veiling or unveiling has been used instrumentally by state elites to consolidate their foundation of power or by the opposition and also women’s activists as a symbol against the state policy.

¹⁵ The UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace and security is a fundamental step for ensuring that state and non-state actors address the situation of women in war, ensure their protection from violence and promote their participation on peacebuilding.

through a legislative framework. The Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) was established to serve as an instrument for the formulation, planning and implementation of the gender policy. Nevertheless since the beginning, its existence has been challenged by conservative forces and lack of financial and human resources.¹⁶

To emphasise the rhetorical-formal commitment to women's rights and gender equality, gender is also defined as cross-cutting issue in the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS), which outlines the governmental strategies for security, governance, economic growth and poverty reduction. The National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA), which has been drafted by the MoWA in cooperation with the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), is the main tool for the operationalisation and implementation of the national commitments and strategies to advance women's rights and gender equality. Intended as a reference, the NAPWA should also guide the gender policy of the international community.¹⁷

To enhance the political participation of women and empower women in high-level decision-making positions, Afghanistan has adopted positive discrimination measures. Thereby, reserved seats in governmental bodies are considered to be an effective and sustainable mechanism to gain a more balanced representation of both genders. A gender quota in the Wolesi Jirga¹⁸ regulates the number reserved for women: 68 of out of 249 seats are reserved for women.¹⁹ Quotas cannot guarantee a gender perspective in the political decision-making, but bringing a critical mass of women into governance structures is essential to removing traditional gender stereotypes, as women actively participate in a male-dominated sphere. Unfortunately, in Afghanistan, this affirmative step has not yet been fully translated into further measures to overcome patriarchal male-dominated power structures. As long as these structures exist, equal access to and full participation at all levels of decision-making cannot be realised.

After almost 13 years of international presence, Afghanistan is far away from normality and the conflict dynamics still determine the political, social, legal and economic structures and reality. This fragile context has a negative impact on situation of women and Afghanistan is still one of the most dangerous countries in the world for women.²⁰ Evidence shows that the fear of women activists and organisations is not abstract. The former Minister of MoWA and chairperson of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission Sima Samar expressed

¹⁶ See Article 22 of the constitution of the Islamic republic of Afghanistan: „Any kind of discrimination and distinction between citizens of Afghanistan shall be forbidden. The citizens of Afghanistan, man and woman, have equal rights and duties before the law.

Kreile, *Fragil und umkämpft - Frauenrechte im neuen Afghanistan*. Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung Dossier Afghanistan, p. 189.

¹⁷ Larson, A. (2008). *A Mandate to Mainstream: Promoting Gender Equality in Afghanistan*. Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, p. 18. Retrieved from <http://areu.org.af/Uploads/EditionPdfs/820E-A%20Mandate%20to%20Mainstream%20IP%20web.pdf>

Wordsworth, A. (2008). *Moving to the Mainstream: Integrating Gender in Afghanistan's National Policy*. Kabul: Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit, pp. 18-22. Retrieved from <http://www.areu.org.af/Uploads/EditionPdfs/803E-Moving%20to%20Mainstream-WP-print.pdf.pdf>

¹⁸ The Wolesi Jirga is the lower house of the bicameral National Assembly of Afghanistan.

¹⁹ Inter Parliamentary Union. (2014). *Women in National Parliaments*. Retrieved from <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/classif.htm>

In August 2013, a new electoral law reduced the 25 percent quota for women's representation in the provincial councils to 20 percent. The last elections for the provincial councils took place in April 2014.

²⁰ Anderson, L. (2011, June 15). TRUSTLAW POLL – Afghanistan is most dangerous country for women. *Thomas Reuters Foundation*. Retrieved from <http://www.trust.org/item/?map=trustlaw-poll-afghanistan-is-most-dangerous-country-for-women>

her concerns that women's gains could be "traded off for short-term political gains".²¹ Since the transfer of security from the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to the Afghan National Security Force in 2011, the physical and verbal harassment and threats have increased.²² Women face more and more restrictions and limitations in the public and private sphere due to the deterioration of the security situation and the lack of adherence to the rule of law.

Another cause of concern is the gap between rhetoric and reality: although women are guaranteed equal rights under the constitution and Afghanistan has ratified international conventions and commitments to women's rights and gender equality, their implementation and institutionalisation are highly challenged. This inconsistency reflects the Afghan government's and president Karzai's political stance, which is driven by self-preservation rather than by a firm commitment to women's rights and gender equality. The post-2014 scenario raises concerns that the already weak state will be further destabilised and the security situation will worsen. Shifting the mission from a predominantly military to a more political-civilian approach may also lead to a decline in the interest of the international community followed by a drop of financial and material aid, despite allegations to the contrary. It seems a real option that as soon as the political pressure from the international community will drop, political leaders will backtrack on the commitments by aligning with conservative forces in order to stay in power. Consequently, the achievements and progress in women's rights and gender equality could be jeopardised.²³

4. The EU's foreign and development policy: what place for gender?

Gender equality is one of the common values and norms of the EU and therefore the promotion of gender equality is recognised as a principle, an objective and a key task of the EU. Gender equality was identified for the first time as a cross-cutting issue in the 2005 European Consensus on Development, which defines empowerment of women as a key to development and "therefore the EU will include a strong gender component in all its policies and practices in its relations with developing countries".²⁴

In recent years, the increasing significance of including a gender-aware perspective in all foreign and development activities has been reflected in various policy documents. These key documents create the framework for mainstreaming gender into all policies, strategies, conceptions, programmes and actions. The growing awareness of the gap between EU policy and practice led to the adoption of the operational document EU Plan of Action on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Development in 2010.²⁵ Its aim is to strengthen the coordination and implementation of the agreed EU gender policy. In order to achieve

²¹ Sen, A. K. (2012, April 17). Taliban talks terrify Afghan women. New rights in fragile state. *The Washington Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/apr/17/taliban-talks-terrify-women/?page=all>

²² United Nations News Centre (2013). Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=45536>

²³ Information obtained through Interview. Lemmon, G. T. (2013, May 20). Worrying Signs Afghan Women's Rights Will Slip After U.S. Departure. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved from <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2013/05/worrying-signs-afghan-womens-rights-will-slip-after-us-departure/276024/>

²⁴ Joint Statement by the Council and the representatives of the governments of the member states meeting within the Council, The European Parliament and the Commission. 2005. *European Consensus on Development*, p. 4. Retrieved from http://ec.europa.eu/development/icenter/repository/eu_consensus_en.pdf

²⁵ European Commission. (2010). *EU Plan of Action on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Development 2010-2015*. Retrieved from http://ec.europa.eu/development/icenter/repository/SEC_2010_265_gender_action_plan_EN.pdf

sustainable and effective impacts on the ground, the Action Plan is based on a three-pronged approach: gender mainstreaming, specific actions targeting only women and the systematic integration of gender equality issues into policy and political dialogues with third states.²⁶

The EU's commitments to gender equality, women's rights and empowerment are embedded into a broader international normative structure that constitutes the framework for achieving and promoting women's rights and gender empowerment within the EU's engagement in Afghanistan.²⁷

5. The EU's engagement in Afghanistan through a gender lens

The European Commission has been present in Afghanistan since the mid-1980s. From the early 1990s, the European Aid and Civilian Protection Department of the European Commission (ECHO) operated in Afghanistan delivering humanitarian assistance. After the fall of the Taliban in 2001 and the establishment of the Interim Transitional Authority, the EU set up a Delegation of the European Commission to Afghanistan and appointed a EU Special Representative (EUSR). The bilateral partnership agreement, the Joint Declaration, was signed in 2005 and outlined a close co-operation, based on Afghan ownership. Today, the EU is a major donor of development and humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. As a civilian power, the EU carries out its foreign policy through primarily civilian means and has adopted a soft-power (political-civilian) approach towards Afghanistan. This mainly focuses on eliminating poverty, promoting good governance, human rights and supporting the peace and reconciliation process.²⁸

Despite the fact that the EU is one of the major donors in Afghanistan and a large number of EU Member States contribute to the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), its ability to generate impact on the ground is limited. This reflects the EU's internal fragmentation and shows its weakness to act as a strong foreign actor. The lack of vertical cohesion between the EU and its Member States constrained, especially before the Lisbon Treaty reform, the EU's ability to coordinate and lead the Afghanistan agenda. As a consequence, the Member States attempted to promote their own national foreign policy agendas.²⁹ Therefore, EU Member States were for a long time not able and willing to agree on a common and coherent EU strategy for Afghanistan.³⁰ As an ongoing consequence, the EU is still limited in translating its financial, technical and material assistance into real political influence. This has significant effects on the EU's substantial influence in shaping

²⁶ O'Connell, H. (2013, April). *Implementing the European Union gender action plan 2010-2015: challenges and opportunities*. London: Overseas Development Institute.

²⁷ O'Connell, *Implementing the European Union gender action plan 2010-2015: challenges and opportunities*.

²⁸ Information obtained through Interview

Upadhyay, D. K. (2013). *The EU and State Building in Failed States: An Analysis of European Engagement in Afghanistan*. *Global Europe*, 4/2013. Retrieved from http://www.global-europe.org/pdf_files/ge_briefing_paper-d.k.pdf

European Union External Action Service. *Afghanistan*. Retrieved from http://eeas.europa.eu/afghanistan/index_en.htm

²⁹ The new foreign policy structure, created by the Lisbon Treaty, seeks to ensure that the EU speaks with a single voice and to strengthen the coordination and steering the political and development agenda of the EU institutions and its Member States. As a consequence of the Lisbon Treaty, the EU's presence in third countries, including Afghanistan, was reshaped and a single EU Delegation was created, combining the offices of EU Special Representative and the former EC Delegation.

³⁰ Buckley, J. (2010, April). Can the EU be more effective in Afghanistan? *Centre for European Reform*, Policy Brief. Korski, D. (2009). *Shaping Europe's Afghan Surge*. *European Council on Foreign Relations*. Policy Brief.

the policy and strategy of the international community, primarily determined by the US administration, which generally continued pursuing a military solution to challenges in Afghanistan. If the EU wants to improve its performance in Afghanistan and gain more influence, it should, together with its Member States, strengthen the coordination, cooperation and coherency and this requires Member States to delegate authority to the EU.³¹

5.1 The gender dimension in the EU's engagement in Afghanistan

The EU's engagement in Afghanistan is based on the premise to integrate and mainstream gender into all policy documents, programmes and actions. From the earliest phase of the intervention, the EU showed its commitment to Afghan women not only rhetorically, rather the EU also provided a political platform for them. In early December 2001, at the same time as the international Afghanistan conference in Bonn, the Afghan Women's Summit took place at the European Commission in Brussels. The Brussels Declaration outlined a vision for the future of Afghanistan and required the funds allocated by the international community for the reconstruction of Afghanistan to be conditioned on the inclusion of women. The European Parliament subsequently adopted a resolution on women in Afghanistan referring to the Declaration and calling all the political forces to recognise women's rights in their political stance and to provide gender sensitive humanitarian and development aid.³²

Today, development aid is an important instrument in the hands of the EU for mainstreaming gender considerations in Afghanistan, especially through supporting and funding women-specific projects. They directly target women as beneficiaries of development assistance, aiming at women's empowerment. Beside these specific projects, a gender perspective is also being taken into consideration in all the other projects. According to DG DEVCO, out of the 272 contracts signed by the EU Delegation in Afghanistan between 2010 and 2013, 28 contracts include gender as a main objective and 95 contracts include gender as a significant objective.³³ EU projects support women by providing legal aid and protection for women and girls at risk, building capacities of national and local institutions and making them responsive and accountable for women's needs and rights, empowering and strengthening women to participate actively in civil society and being part of the democratic process.³⁴

Gender issues are also reflected in the strategic and conceptual framework of the European Union's engagement in Afghanistan. The Country Strategy Paper (CSP) and the Multiannual Indicative Programme (MIP), which provide the common framework and the strategic tool for programming the EU's assistance to Afghanistan highlights, among others, gender as a cross-cutting issue, which has to be mainstreamed in all focal and non-focal areas targeting the current imbalance between men and women.³⁵

Sharp criticism was expressed by the European Parliament concerning the EU's Afghanistan

³¹ Information obtained through Interview

³² European Parliament. (2001, December 12). *Resolution on women in Afghanistan*. Retrieved from <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+MOTION+P5-RC-2001-0763+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN>

³³ Information obtained through Interview

³⁴ European External Action Service. *Delegation of the European Union to Afghanistan*. Retrieved from http://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/afghanistan/projects/case_studies/index_en.htm

³⁵ European Commission. (2012). *Afghanistan*. State of play. Retrieved from http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/where/asia/country-cooperation/afghanistan/documents/eu_afghanistan_state-of-play_0712_en.pdf

strategy. The Parliament demanded a fundamental rethinking of the Afghanistan strategy and stressed that despite important improvements, the situation of women in Afghanistan remains a matter of concern, and stability is impossible to achieve, as long as women do not enjoy full political, social and economic rights. Therefore, the Parliament reiterated that the European Union and its Member States should support the reconstruction of a strong, accountable and just Afghan state and institutions should include gender sensitive measures to eradicate discrimination against women, strengthen respect for human rights and the rule of law. Along with the parliamentarians calling for a boost to integrate and mainstream gender and women's rights into all policies, documents, programmes and actions – Gender Mainstream and special measures for enhancing the respect for women's rights and empowerment – the European Parliament urged the Commission, the Council and Member States to include issues of gender based discriminations in the political dialogue.³⁶ This criticism can be understood as an indication that the EU's commitments to gender equality and women's empowerment have not been adequately integrated and therefore the implementation is lagging behind.

The normative underpinning of the EU's engagement in Afghanistan is also reaffirmed by representatives of the EU. On several occasions the EU representatives confirm their commitment for the long-term support for Afghanistan and especially for Afghan women beyond 2014. The former head of Delegation and EU Special Representative in Afghanistan Ambassador Vygaudas Usackas, stressed in his statement on the occasion of international women's day 2012 that *"equality between women and men is a fundamental right, a common value of the European Union and a necessary condition for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth both within the European Union and abroad, as well as a key principle in its external actions. (...) This is why the European Union strongly promotes women`s rights and gender equality and fights discrimination against women and girls."*³⁷ Considering women as "drivers of change", the EU assigned women an important role in promoting peace and fostering security. Nevertheless, despite rhetorical commitments there is a looming fear that women's rights will be negotiated away in the quest for short-term political goals to end the war and make peace with insurgent groups. Therefore, human rights activists in and outside Afghanistan try hard to lobby and raise awareness within the Afghan government and the international community, reminding them of their commitment, enshrined in the UNSCR 1325, to integrate women in the peace and reconciliation process. The recognition that conflict, peace- and state-building are "gendered processes" is based on the assumption, that women's motives, needs and interests are a prerequisite for achieving stability and sustainability in Afghanistan.

³⁶ Europäische Kommission. (2007). *Länderstrategiepapier Islamische Republik Afghanistan 2007-2013*. Retrieved from http://eeas.europa.eu/afghanistan/csp/07_13_de.pdf

European Parliament. (2010, December 16). *A new strategy for Afghanistan*. European Parliament resolution on a new strategy for Afghanistan. (2009/2217(INI). Retrieved from <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P7-TA-2010-0490+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=IT>

European Parliament. (2010, July 8). *Amtsblatt der Europäischen Union. Entschliessung des Europäischen Parlaments vom 24. April 2009 zu Frauenrechten in Afghanistan*. C 184 E/57;

European Parliament. (2013, June 14). *Amtsblatt der Europäischen Union. Entschliessung des Europäischen Parlaments vom 15. Dezember 2011 zu der Lage der Frauen in Afghanistan und Pakistan*. C168 E/119.

³⁷ European External Action Service. (2012, May 7). *Delegation of the European Union to Afghanistan. Statement by Special Representative and Head of the EU Delegation to Afghanistan Ambassador Vygaudas Ušackas on behalf of the EU Member States and to which Norway aligns itself on the occasion of International Women's Day*. Retrieved from http://eeas.europa.eu/delegations/afghanistan/press_corner/all_news/news/2012/20120307_en.htm

5.2 Case Study: Gender Mainstreaming in the European Policy Mission (EUPOL)

The European Policy Mission (EUPOL) is the most visible and high-profile initiative of the EU, launched in 2007 under the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP).³⁸ EUPOL was set up to improve policing and the rule of law. Therefore it mainly focuses on training and monitoring the Afghan National Police (ANP), the Ministry of Interior and prosecutors. The mission formally implements the EU's gender policy through the institutionalisation of the Human Rights and Gender Unit. With the support of EUPOL, a helpline for Afghan policewomen was established. A textbook for the training, *Human Rights, Gender and Child Rights*, was developed by EUPOL and the National Police Academy.³⁹

Despite all the aforementioned efforts, female police officers are still underrepresented, especially in rural areas, due to gender barriers such as social and cultural perceptions, restrictions in movement, lack of understanding of the importance of female police officers within the community and the police, as well as the female unfriendly environment e.g. lack of female dormitories, gender segregated toilets and child care facilities. This absence of female police officers has negative impact on women's ability to report crimes and access to justice. Social and cultural norms, low public protection capacity of the ANP – traditional police functions relating to the upholding of justice and the rule of law are limited due to the security environment –, lack of knowledge of relevant laws by male police officers and simply ignorance, prevent women from approaching policeman. Consequently, the lack of prosecution is perpetuated as well as a culture of impunity.⁴⁰

6. Conclusion

Considering the performance of foreign actors in Afghanistan during more than a decade, it becomes obvious that gender sensitive and inclusive obligations and commitments contest with the political pragmatism of the United States (as the lead nation) and the European Union. The reality in Afghanistan clearly highlights that rhetorically advanced gender policies, programmes and strategies, set by the international community, do not automatically translate into real impact and outcomes and all too often fail to materialise and evaporate. In highly militarised environments, like Afghanistan, power and authority are traditionally associated with masculinity. Therefore the discourse of power and state has always been discussed in gendered terms, favouring men. Considering the historical background, there is a risk today that without integrating a gender perspective into all policies, activities and strategies, gender-based inequalities in power and unequal access to decision-making in public and private institutions, resources, rights and education that block the realisation of women's rights, are rendered invisible and continue to have negative impacts on women. The structural causes of gender-based discrimination are left unchanged and transformation in gender relations, which is a necessary condition for gender equality, is not achieved.

³⁸ Isalm, Sh. and Gross, E. (2009, March). Afghanistan: Europe's credibility test. *European Policy Centre*. Policy Brief. Retrieved from http://epc.eu/documents/uploads/60505381_Afghanistan.pdf

³⁹ EUPOL. Official website EUPOL. Retrieved from <http://www.eupol-afg.eu>
Troszczyńska-van Genderen, W. (2010, August). Human Rights challenges in EU civilian crisis management: the cases of EUPOL and EUJUST LEX. *EU Institute for Security Studies*. Retrieved from <http://www.iss.europa.eu/uploads/media/OcassionalPaper84.pdf>

⁴⁰ OXFAM. (2013, September 10). Women and the Afghan Police. Why a law enforcement agency that respects and protects females is crucial for progress. *OXFAM Briefing Paper*.

For a sustainable and peaceful development it is imperative that the EU, its Member States and all the other external actors pursue a more coherent and harmonised strategy towards Afghanistan. Afghanisation, the process of handing over responsibility, control and ownership to the Afghan authorities and people, requires mutual partnership between the international community and the new Afghan government based on realistic conditions and aims. The Afghan government must be enabled and able to keep its commitment to protect women's rights and create an environment in which women can participate actively, safely and equally. It is obvious that the effective implementation of a gender sensitive and inclusive policy requires a strong and stable state with a functioning accountability system and implementation mechanism.

7. Final remarks

Despite all the difficulties, the situation in Afghanistan leaves room for some cautious optimism. Firstly, Afghanistan today is not the same as it was prior to the intervention. In 2001, Afghanistan was a non-functioning state, the humanitarian situation was chaotic and the gender policies of the Taliban, as well as other groups, reflected their inherent misogynistic attitude towards women. Since then, significant progress has been achieved, considering that the nation- and state-building process in Afghanistan started almost from scratch. Access to health care has improved, girls are back to school and women can study at university. Equal rights are guaranteed in the constitution and the national women's machinery (the Ministry of Women's Affairs) was set up. The Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) has a watchdog function to monitor and make sure that gender policies are implemented. Furthermore, women are visible, they play a transformative role in the civil society by mobilising social movements, they raise their voices as politicians and activists influencing public opinion and promoting accountability. Moreover, an increasing number of women are engaged in business and entrepreneurial activities. All these hard-won gains women have achieved are encouraging, but at the same time they remind us of the fragility of the situation and that there is still a long way to go. For the situation to improve, it is absolutely necessary that the withdrawal of the international forces does not negatively affect women and brings a setback of their achievements.⁴¹

Secondly, the shift of the international engagement to a more political-civilian approach is a vital opportunity for the EU to assume a more decisive role, especially in supporting the peace, democratisation and reconciliation process. It is an opportunity for the EU to take the lead in promoting women's rights by granting them the highest priority in the political and development agenda. The EU together with all the other international donors must use its leverage on the Afghan government, which is heavily dependent on foreign funds, ensuring that women participate in high-level peace talks, in order to make sure that their needs, interests and voices are not marginalised.

Finally, from a pragmatic point of view, the international community has to bear in mind that the fate of the Afghan state is wrapped up with the international community. Therefore, abandoning Afghanistan again, is not only disastrous for Afghanistan, but also for the prestige, the reputation and the legitimacy of the international community.

⁴¹ Information obtained through Interview

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