

**Between Modernity and Tradition: How Afghan Women Successfully
De-identify from Gender Norms and Negotiate Opportunity Structures
for Empowerment**



**Merissa McCaw
3891372
Utrecht University
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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

“Afghanistan is still one of the worst countries in the world to be a woman.” In February, Amnesty International stated the grim reality that, despite a decade of international involvement, support, and funding, women in Afghanistan face fierce resistance to all attempts to exercise their agency and improve their status. A country in transition, Afghanistan is caught between (mainly externally imposed) modernizing forces and ancient traditions. One of the most important factors fueling uncertainty about its future is the role of women in society. Changes to women’s rights is one of the most visible effects of the international community’s 2001 invasion, yet actual progress is unclear, and reports of Afghan women’s current status often assign them agency in a “struggle for their rights” that is difficult to prove. In research and progress reports, the “status of Afghan women” is often discussed as a singular term, as though all women experience more or less the same obstacles, challenges, and treatment. Attempting to shake off generalizations and categorizations, this research explores the question:

How did certain Kabul women de-identify from the social and gender norms of the larger social structure in which they operate, while successfully negotiating opportunity structures for empowerment?

The data presented in this paper gives voice to several Kabul women who are decidedly not the norm, and who are among the very few that tend to be held up as examples of how far Afghan women have come on the path to empowerment and equality. Their experiences and accomplishments are anomalies among Afghan women, and this research attempts to uncover the reasons why these women were able to successfully fight considerable resistance, and overcome huge obstacles on the way to becoming successful, prominent, empowered women when to date, few women have been able to do so.

1.2 PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The research presented here explores the experiences of these individual women, all of whom occupy either an official position of authority, or have empowered themselves by successfully pursuing a career they see as fulfilling, as they negotiate new opportunity structures for empowerment in Kabul. In a country ravaged by three decades of conflict, oppressive ideology, and lack of resources, women bear the brunt of the disadvantages. Without claiming to be representative of Kabul women, the ideas presented in this research dive in-depth into the experiences of four women as they operate in positions of authority and exercise agency in public settings, how they took advantage of opportunity structures to achieve their current positions, and what their projections are for their own situation, and that of other women, after the international community largely withdraws in 2014. The data presented here seeks to humanize a few women who have defied great odds to become empowered in Kabul. Rather than comment on the socio-political status of Afghan (or even Kabul) women, this is an attempt to bring readers closer to a few exceptional women, the women who are sometimes held up as examples of the benefits of the international community's presence in Afghanistan.

1.3 KEY TERMS

I approached my analysis of the data collected through a structurationist lens. In applying this theory, I focus particularly on Giddens's description of concepts as both enabling and constraining (Giddens 1984: 21, 258 in Whittington 1992: 695). According to Giddens, social systems are constituted by the actions and activities of human agents, who are in turn both enabled and constrained by the structural properties of those systems (Giddens 1984: 25 in Whittington 1992: 696).

In applying this lens to the data collected, I also turn to Giddens's definition of agency as the standard by which I utilize the term. Giddens writes that "to be an agent is to be able to deploy (chronically in the flow of daily life) a range of causal powers" (Giddens 1984: 14 in Whittington 1992: 696). Giddens places particular importance on choice. Actors have the power to act within the system and play by its rules, or refuse, even if that refusal results in death. So long as there is choice, there is agency. The

women I profile in this data made the choice to step outside the accepted boundaries of their roles within the structure they inhabit; therefore they are conscious actors expressing their agency. However it is their struggle against a rigid and constraining structure that makes the choice to defy established rules and prevailing powers worthy of research.

1.4 METHODOLOGY

I conducted this research during a three-month internship at 1TV, one of the largest Afghan television news stations. During my time there, I utilized the station's professional network to reach out to prominent Kabul women. Several had been interviewed or featured on 1TV programs, others were within the professional networks of my coworkers, and still others were in the professional network of the friends I made during my time there. I chose women representing different fields: business, government, NGOs, education, journalism, multi-media, and law enforcement. All the interviews were sit-down conversations, ranging from one to three hours in length, at locations of the women's choosing.

The research is qualitative in nature, the presentation and analysis of the individual experiences, traits, and backgrounds of the women in Kabul who exercise their agency in ways few Kabul women dare to do. It is not meant to represent a larger trend, and does not claim to be anything other than a deeper look at several individual women who are remarkable in their actions and accomplishments. It is a more personal view of the types of women indicated when discussing Afghan women's "struggle for equality".

Out of the women I interviewed during my time in Kabul, I chose four to profile in this research. I chose them because they had very different ideas about empowerment and agency, and had arrived at their current positions in very different ways. Their backgrounds and experience reflect careers in four of the most important areas I identified for progress in women's empowerment: government, law enforcement, media, and business. Two of the women occupy positions that by definition convey a degree of respect and authority. Their occupation of those positions, when Kabul social norms deem it inappropriate, is a societal contradiction that has often made their job far more difficult than it would be for a man, yet these women chose to persevere and succeed in

the face of incredible odds. Following is a brief introduction of each of the women, to provide context when discussing their actions and attributes.

1.5 SUBJECT PRESENTATION

Seema Ghani is the current Executive Director of the Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation League, an independent organization that monitors and evaluates national and international efforts to fight corruption in Afghanistan. The organization issues recommendations in the areas of governance and law enforcement, addressing policy gaps in both national and international efforts to fight corruption (2013). Ghani calls her work ‘naming and shaming’ and cites its success in drawing public attention to, and increasing accountability in government. Ghani is often the public face of the organization, and her prominence is all the more remarkable since her job is to publicly shame men in government and law enforcement. Afghan pride is fierce, and a woman publicly shaming a man for his job performance is dangerous (for the woman) and fairly unprecedented.

Ghani was born in Afghanistan, but moved to the U.K. with her family in 1990, during the last two years of the communist regime. She lived in the U.K. for 12 years, obtaining a Master’s in International Business and International Studies. She set up a U.K.-based charity, working with refugee camps in Pakistan, focusing on children who became orphaned due to conflict. She returned to Kabul permanently in 2002, working briefly with UNAMA, then became the Director of Budgets at the Ministry of Finance before taking her position as Director of the non-governmental Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee.

Through her work with orphans of war, Ghani adopted seven children. She was only emotional when she talked about her children, her self-described ‘weakness’. She was unmarried, making her the target of criticism from people who thought a woman living without a man was unacceptable. The oldest of her children was not quite in high school, and she was extremely protective of them. When issuing reports or criticisms, Ghani would not allow her children to walk to school alone, and invited their friends to her house, rather than letting them out in areas she could not see or protect them.ⁱ

Anisa Rasouly is a Kabul judge and the head of the Afghan Women Judges Association. She says she achieved her position the same all judges do – she studied at the Kabul University Faculty of Law, completed two years of judges training, and was approved as a judge by the presidential palace. She is currently obtaining her Master's in Law with the aid of an international educational grant. Without that grant, Rasouly said she would never have been able to obtain her Master's. Rasouly lost her job when the Taliban took power in 1996, and spent the next five years in Peshawar. After the 2001 invasion, she returned with documents proving her qualifications and previous work as a judge and she was allowed to return to work. As a high-ranking judge, Rasouly is a visible public figure in a position of authority. She issues judgments that men must follow, though many believe that as a woman she cannot tell them what to do.ⁱⁱ

Farrukh Leqa is a young journalist with the International Development Law Organization (IDLO). At 23, she has already worked with Killid and Internews as a journalist, and works while finishing her Bachelor's degree at Kabul University. She writes for herself as well as professionally, and hopes her writings will inspire both herself and others to believe in their own abilities and strength. She comes from a more conservative family and her struggle is not just against societal norms that restrict her opportunities and movements, but against her family's wishes. Though she was not the only woman of her generation I interviewed, she stood out because of her career experience (unusually lengthy for her age) and awareness and analysis of her own situation as a young, ambitious, career-oriented Kabul woman.ⁱⁱⁱ

Zuhra Bahman is the founder and CEO of Inteqal, a capacity development company that conducts training, research, and translation with accredited partners across Afghanistan. She is currently in the process of starting up two new businesses in Kabul. One will provide cleaning, gardening, landscaping, and unarmed security services, and the other will be a small manufacturing company to employ women who will lose their jobs due to ISAF withdrawals. The manufacturing company plans to make high-quality clothing, mostly for infants. It is intended to occupy a niche market, creating and establishing an Afghan brand and quality to hand-made clothes, rather than attempting to compete with Pakistan and Bangladesh for production volume.

Bahman was born in Kabul, and educated in Kabul and Mazar-e-Sharif. During Taliban rule, was homeschooled by her teacher parents. She attended university and graduate school in the U.K. and is currently halfway through her Ph.D. Her parents encouraged her and her brother to express their personalities and pursue things that interested them. They allowed their children to explore their senses of self, provided them with books and the freedom to debate different ideas, and created what Bahman described as a safe environment to explore their identities as people without the constraints of gendered activities and behaviors.^{iv}

1.6 SOCIAL LIFE IN AFGHANISTAN: CONTEXT FOR SITUATING FINDINGS WITHIN THE AFGHAN SOCIAL SPHERE

The importance of history, tradition, and religion in shaping the current situation of women's empowerment and gender norms in Kabul is crucial to understanding how remarkable these women are in their achievements and attitudes. In order to place their journey to empowerment in context, I must briefly reiterate the challenges with which they have been faced.

When the Taliban took control of Kabul in 1996, they instituted an extremely repressive and punitive religious regime. Cole discusses in detail the 'extreme privatization of women' (Cole 2003:790). While gender segregation is nothing new in Afghan society, under the Taliban, attempts were made to completely remove women from the public sphere. Girls were banned from attending schools and women were required to stay within their homes (Cole 2003:793). Women who failed to completely veil their faces were subjected to public beatings, (Cole 2003:797). Women could only go outside if they were accompanied by a *mahram*, a close male relative. During Ramadan, they could not go outside at all (Cole 2003:797). Women who were ill could only be treated by female doctors, of which there were very few. The ban on education for girls meant there was no new generation of women doctors (Cole 2003:797). Women could not laugh or speak loudly, they could not wear shoes that made noise when walking, and makeup and nail polish were banned. Any women who did not follow these rules were beaten, whipped, stoned, or mutilated (Cole 2003:797). Twenty years of war

had left as many as 30,000 ‘war widows’, many of whom had no male relatives that were able and willing to support them. New Taliban restrictions left them with no way to earn a living apart from begging or prostitution, both of which carried enormous risks (Cole 2003:798). Many women began suffering from depression and post-traumatic stress disorder from being confined within four walls with nothing to keep their minds occupied (Cole 2003:799).

The plight of women and girls under such restrictive rule was part of the justification used by the U.S. and the international community in invading Afghanistan in 2001. Following the fall of the Taliban, the situation for women and girls did improve slightly. The expansion of women’s rights was framed as crucial to national consolidation and development (Kandiyoti 2007: 170). In 2004, the Afghan *Loya Jirga* approved a Constitution that increased the participation of women in government, and referenced the equality of men and women before the law (Kandiyoti 2007: 183). Women were no longer confined to their homes or forced to veil every part of their bodies. However, many of the changes were superficial, and have not been fully implemented or upheld.

Human Rights Watch reports that the lower house of the Afghan parliament is attempting to pass a criminal law revision that would effectively stop prosecutions of those who beat, forcibly marry, or sell female relatives (2013). Members of parliament have increasingly sought to repeal or weaken the Elimination of Violence Against Women law, a crucial piece of legislation protecting Afghan women. In May, Parliament deleted a guarantee in Afghanistan’s Electoral Law that reserved 25 per cent of seats in each of Afghanistan’s 34 provincial councils for female candidates, though the upper house subsequently reinstated the provision (Human Rights Watch 2013).

While the Afghan government devotes time and energy to eroding lawful protection of women’s rights, the reality of life as an Afghan woman continues to be a challenge. According to a report compiled by the Afghan Women’s Network, gender-based discrimination and violence against women is widespread across public and private sectors (2010). Early and forced marriages are common, and women who try to escape such arrangements face prosecution and severe punishment (2010). Low access to education is skewed towards girls, perpetuating women’s inability to access social

development and economic empowerment. Life expectancy among women is as low as 44, and on average 1 in 9 Afghan women die in childbirth, the highest maternal mortality rate in the world (2010).

Women are not afforded security in public spaces. While men socialize and loiter in the streets, women walk briskly, avert their eyes, and do not linger anywhere (Stiftung Report 2011: 10). Public places are male-dominated, and women who must enter them engage in self-censorship and restricted movements (ibid). Girls are taught early on that they must exhibit modesty when outside the home by covering their heads, keeping their eyes downcast, and avoiding contact with boys. If they do not respect these social norms, they are teased or harassed by boys. Adults do not check the harassment, reinforcing messages about acceptable public behavior (Stiftung Report 2011: 10). When a woman marries, she takes on the responsibility of her husband's social reputation and is encouraged to spend more time at home and shift her focus to motherhood. Women who work outside the home are pressured to give up their jobs and have children (ibid).

The women interviewed and presented in this paper have found ways to live outside the social norms thrust upon Kabul women. They represent a tiny number of women who were able to defy expectations, societal norms, and a system designed to prevent them from achieving success and empowerment. Their stories are championed by national and international organizations and government reports, without a mention of how rare these women are, or what unique combination of talents, background, and determination they possess.

ⁱ Based on interview with Seema Ghani. Executive Director of the Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee, Kabul, Afghanistan. 21 May 2013.
ⁱⁱ Based on interview with Anisul Haq. Director, Afghan Women Judges Association. Kabul, Afghanistan. 5 May 2013.

ⁱⁱⁱ Based on interview with Farrukh Leqa. Journalist, IDLO. Kabul, Afghanistan. 18 May 2013.

^{iv} Based on interview with Zuhra Bahman. Founder & CEO, Inteqal. Kabul, Afghanistan. 27 May 2013.

2. SOCIAL AND GENDER NORMS, & RULES OF SOCIAL LIFE

2.1 GENDER NORMS IN KABUL

In achieving high levels of success and personal empowerment, the women presented in this data had to struggle against a society governed by rigid gender norms. These norms are rules of social life that govern interpretations of appropriate behavior for women and men (Badgett and Folbre 1999:311). Gender norms are also part of social processes that create lines of demarcation and domination (Acker 1992:567). Essentially, gender norms define what societies view as suitable or appropriate roles for the different sexes. In Kabul (as in Afghanistan as a whole), gender norms are used to rigidly enforce female roles that are more subdued and private than the roles for men.

Many reports compiled on Afghan women stepping into public roles caution that they face death threats, attacks, and assassination attempts (Cortright and Wall 2012: 11). Women receive death-threats and break-ins for criticizing warlords and the Taliban (2013). This suggests a strong level of intimidation that women who defy gender norms must face. However, of the women profiled, only Leqa seemed concerned about harassment, violent or otherwise. She reported being afraid almost constantly, and changing her dress to suit the area she was traveling to for work, sometimes covering up more fully in more dangerous areas. The changing of her dress or appearance also drew criticism from people who said her changes in dress indicated that she must not believe in Islam.ⁱ

The other women brushed off security concerns. Rasouly said that any threats or harassment she received were related to her position, not her gender.

‘Put it this way: if two judges are going to be assassinated – a man and me, they might kill me first. But they would kill the man as well.’ⁱⁱ

Ghani reported that her house had been broken into, but that she was not sure it was related to any reports her organization had put out lately. She reported fearing for her children, rather than herself. She was afraid they would be kidnapped as a punishment for her outspokenness, but exhibited no fear for her personal safety. She

simply added barbed wire to her fence, bars to her windows, and hired an armed guard in place of an unarmed one.ⁱⁱⁱ

Bahman brushed off concerns of harassment or threats, saying that people who talk about security do so to make themselves look important. She said she was never afraid of retribution for her company policies or position as a woman CEO.^{iv} This flippant attitude towards what many would reasonably argue is a dangerous position, while not shared by all four women, is an interesting glimpse into the mindset of Rasouly, Ghani, and Bahman. Their sense of security, whether an act or not, allows them to separate security concerns from daily actions, a feat few Afghan women do. They do not allow their personal safety to paralyze them with fear.

2.2 SOCIAL IDENTITIES

Giddens writes that all human beings are knowledgeable agents, who understand the conditions and consequences of their actions in daily life (1984: 281). Generally, what people do is not questioned by the larger society in which they operate *unless* their actions differ from their habitual modes of conduct, or stray from the social identities to which they are constrained (1984: 281-282). These social identities are a form of ‘standardized marker’, often associated with bodily attributes such as gender. Their importance in Kabul society, and the significance that comes with deviating from what are acceptable standardized markers, is what makes the women featured so interesting.

How can these women act as true agents against one of the world’s most repressive social structures? Seema Ghani, Zuhra Bahman, Anisa Rasouly, and Farrukh Leqa are all powerful, determined women, but there are many profiles of such Afghan women in various media sources. What makes them unique is *how* they rose to such prominence and (relative) power: what traits do they share? What sets each one apart from the others? In order to answer these questions, a deeper look into the social identities that constrain them is necessary.

From a structurationist approach, individuals in a society occupy roles that have sets of pre-defined expectations. Even in conformity, individuals (actors) make conscious decisions to obey the rules of the structures they inhabit, whether formal or

informal (Jabri 1996:70). Each actor has a choice, even if the cost of that choice is censure, imprisonment, or death. While individual decision-makers are actors with purpose, they are also role occupants acting within institutional framework that both enable and constrain (ibid). Actors doing what is ‘appropriate’ suggests that continuities such as social norms and cultural values are extremely compelling.

The ‘rules’ Jabri discusses are elements of the structure of social life – a dance between purposive behavior and social structure defined by rules (Jabri 1996:71). The rules that define social life may either encourage or discourage courses of action carried out by specific individuals (Jabri 1996:72). Social (or gender) norms are forms of regulative rules, both defining and guiding actions for actors within the social structure (ibid). Conforming to social norms provides actors with positive reinforcement, while going against them results in social sanctions – techniques for discouraging those who would step outside the boundaries of approved social norms (Jabri 1996:72).

All four women interviewed live outside the boundaries of approved social norms in Kabul. Three of them occupy positions at the tops of their respective fields, and the fourth is making a name for herself in the field of journalism, breaking social expectations of the private, domestic lives women are supposed to lead. In defying social norms however, they all conform to some larger norms that define Kabul social structure.

Bahman and Ghani are mothers, and take care of their households and children when they leave work. Leqa is engaged, and will presumably take on a domestic life in addition to her career ambitions once she is married. These three women follow some of the paths women in Kabul are ‘supposed’ to take, while stepping outside the boundaries in their careers and public lives.

Anisa Rasouly explicitly states that women have a responsibility to take care of the home and the children – but they also have a responsibility to work outside the home.^v She says that when women stay home and do not work, they are unaware of society and their children will suffer as a result. It is women’s responsibility to marry and have children, but also to make sure that her children are properly educated and are polite. Women who are never around other people will have less of an understanding of what is accepted and polite in Kabul social structure. Rasouly believes that Kabul women have a duty to conform to social norms that dictate their responsibilities are primarily caregivers

and producers of the next generation, but she also encourages them to step outside those social norms to educate themselves, and work. Rasouly is aware that her own experiences and sense of pride in her job color her thoughts on the appropriate roles for women in Kabul society. Her decision to become a judge, and to return to her work after the fall of the Taliban, was a conscious decision on her part to push the boundaries of the social roles set aside for her.

2.3 AGENCY AND DE-IDENTIFICATION PROCESSES

Jabri discusses a concept important to understanding how the women I interviewed were able to break free from constraining social and gender norms. She writes that because social actors have agency, they can “de-identify” or emancipate themselves from dominant rules of social life (1996: 134). Essentially, actors can make the conscious decision not to conform to social norms and roles, and express their agency in roles of their own construction or modification.

The women I interviewed used their agency to de-identify from their social roles, and modify those roles to fit a norm of their own making. In doing so, they risked threats, violence against their persons and families, and social ostracization. Each of them went about it in a slightly different way, and to varying degrees. Zuhra Bahman not only reconstructed her role to give herself more freedom and to exercise her agency more fully, she created policies in her company that encouraged other women to do the same, and encouraged men to understand and accept the new roles the women tried out.

When writing about de-identification from social norms, Zuhra Bahman is the best example to hold up. Out of all the women interviewed, and those featured in this writing, Bahman pushed boundaries the farthest and owned her agency most compellingly. As the founder and CEO of 3 small companies, she was already an anomaly among Kabul women. At her work, Bahman encouraged women to actively resist gender norms that stereotyped them as less productive than men. Bahman started an at-work daycare, allowing the women working for her to continue working after they had babies. Initially started for her first child, Bahman quickly realized that if daycare options were available, the women in her employ would take advantage of them.

‘As a mother myself, I think it’s really important to be a mother and balance work. Socially there’s a lot of pressure to stay home and look after your baby rather than go to work and jeopardize its health and safety.’^{vi}

By creating an environment where the children of working Kabul women could be cared for and be near their mothers, Bahman actively tried to make working mothers more socially acceptable in her small circle. The men that worked for her became used to seeing women in a more feminine way (as mothers), while still being productive in a way Bahman says women in Kabul aren’t assumed to be. Some of the men working for her are single, some are married, but they are all exposed to a completely new social role for the women that choose to work and have children at Bahman’s company.

Many of Bahman’s company decisions are made in a subtle campaign to legitimize her presence as the head of the company, the person who has the final say on all decisions, who can second-guess or fire the men working under her employ. Her decisions and policies are less about making men more accepting of women in general, and more about establishing her authority and securing the respect of those who work for her. To that end, Bahman encourages men to talk about their wives and to call them by name. She encourages the men to befriend their female coworkers’ husbands to make the husbands feel more secure about where their wives are working, and she actively tries to socialize men to work with women. She places at least one woman in every department, and makes sure women always answer the phones, so that anyone who calls her company will speak to a woman.

As the founder and leader of her company, Bahman is in a unique position to demand respect from men who would not otherwise give it. She handles disrespect bluntly; ‘When men question my authority, I fire them.’ When she was starting, the men she hired assumed that they could fool her and undermine her. One refused to say her name properly. Many automatically thought she didn’t know what she was talking about, or that everything she said was wrong. One male employee complained that she was an example of the violence men in Kabul suffer from women. Several team leaders in her consulting company would ignore her direct orders on research projects and make their

own research directives (never as thorough or complete as Bahman's). When she began firing men, she faced even more resistance, as the men still working for her became nervous and starting complaining that she must be a bitch, her in-laws must hate her, her house must be very dirty, her husband must be miserable. Gradually, the resistance settled down, and Bahman says her male employees now have an uneasy acceptance of her authority. They rationalize that she is 'alright' but that other women are bad.^{vii}

Bahman's persistent pushing of her social role extends beyond work. She says most Kabul women never socialize with their husbands. They sit at home and entertain other women. Bahman goes out with her husband and sits with his friends. The men she is with almost invariably believe that women should not socialize, or meet people outside of their immediate families. While they are uncomfortable with her presence, she refuses to let their definitions of appropriate female roles dictate her actions and movements.

Bahman's actions and company policies push acceptable social norms for women in Kabul. She describes her actions as often frightening and enraging the men around her, though she never admits to feeling fear. Her actions suggest a much more Western approach, but she dismisses the suggestion that she pushes gender and social boundaries in an effort to be a feminist or trailblazer for women's empowerment in Kabul, saying that she is simply trying to run a more effective business and live like a human among other humans.

This suggestion; that these individual Kabul women actively de-identify from rigid social identities adhered to by the vast majority of Kabul women not because they believe passionately in women's rights, but because they view themselves simply as people trying to improve their own situation and that of the people around them, is relevant to an academic debate surrounded by controversy and strong opinions. How do Muslim women empower themselves, when they are constrained by a religion that strictly separates the genders, and interpretations of that religion work to constrain women's agency and empowerment?

ⁱ Based on interview with Farrukh Leqa. Journalist, IDLO. Kabul, Afghanistan. 18 May 2013.

ⁱⁱ Based on interview with Anisa Rasouly. Director, Afghan Women Judges Association. Kabul, Afghanistan. 5 May 2013.

ⁱⁱⁱ Based on interview with Seema Ghani. Executive Director of the Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee. Kabul, Afghanistan. 21 May 2013.

^{iv} Based on interview with Zuhra Bahman. Founder & CEO, Inteqal. Kabul, Afghanistan. 27 May 2013.

^v Based on interview with Anisa Rasouly. Director, Afghan Women Judges Association. Kabul, 5 May 2013.

^{vi} Based on interview with Zuhra Bahman. Founder & CEO, Inteqal. Kabul, 27 May 2013.

^{vii} Based on interview with Zuhra Bahman. Founder & CEO, Inteqal. Kabul, Afghanistan. 27 May 2013.

3. EMPOWERMENT

3.1 EMPOWERMENT QUALIFIERS

Empowerment as a relational construct is primarily used to describe the perceived power that an individual actor or organization has over others (Conger & Kanungo 1988: 471). Power is relevant when an individual's, or subunit's, performance outcomes are not contingent merely on their own behavior, but on how others respond to that behavior (Pfeffer in Kanungo 1988: 472). The Oxford English dictionary defines the verb 'to empower' as 'to enable', which implies motivation through the enhancement or increase in personal efficacy beliefs.

The most common qualifiers for empowerment are political and economic (Eyben 2009: 292). Measuring political and economic empowerment often relies on numbers; are there representative numbers of women in government? - and abstract quotas difficult to quantify; in general, do women have a voice? Do empowered women negotiate on other women's behalf? These are questions that can be answered with organizational and government reports. But *how* women empower themselves requires a more in-depth look at the individual experiences of women in areas where few women exercise agency and are considered empowered. In order to examine individual circumstances, it is important to address the academic debate on women's empowerment in Islamic societies.

3.2 EMPOWERMENT AND ISLAM

In the current political climate, Islam is often associated with the poor treatment of women. There is rarely nuanced analysis of how women engage in their religion and society, and women are often portrayed as passive victims of Islam and a highly patriarchal society (Van Wichelen 2008: 303). Western feminists and scholars often perpetuate descriptions of Muslim women as hopelessly oppressed - women without agency or a voice (Mohanty in McGinty 2007: 475). However, Muslim converts and scholars often cite Islam's messages of social justice, solidarity with the poor, and gender equality when arguing against the notion of Muslim women as passive victims (McGinty 2007: 476).

Particularly relevant to any discussion of empowerment and Kabul women is the tension that arises from Western interpretations of Islam. Kabul in particular is filled with Western troops, organizations, diplomats, and expat workers, creating a very visible Western presence in a very Islamic capitol. The Western belief that the only model for women's empowerment is Western is problematic, since most Muslims take their religion very seriously and prefer to address the problem in a Muslim context (Mejia 2007: 2).

Mejia argues that patriarchal Muslim men misinterpret a Qu'ran verse that they say places men as superior to women. She posits that Muslim women lose their right to self-determination only under extreme conditions, such as insanity, and claims that the verse in question should be interpreted to read that men and women are protectors of each other in Islam (2007: 10-12). This verse is particularly important, as it is the biggest barrier to Muslim women empowering themselves in a society that makes them second-class citizens. This attitude produces the kind of thinking that led Zuhra Bahman's male employees to think that they could trick or scam her, because she was inherently inferior to them.

In researching why some Western or secular women convert to Islam, McGinty discovered that a common narrative is the subjects' identification with Islam's message of social justice, solidarity with the poor, gender equality, and environmental awareness (2007: 476). For some, Islam offers a space in which to explore questions of gender and feminine identity (ibid). It offers an 'equal but different' mentality through which to express gender identities and roles.

In the larger academic debate on empowerment and Islam, most conversation is conducted in feminist writing, where there tends to be a divide between Muslim feminists, who argue that the Qu'ran's message is egalitarian, and secular feminists who view Islam as an active problem in the struggle against women's oppression (Piela 2010: 426). Many scholars argue that Muslim women have identified their own definition of empowerment, and they do not wish to adhere to Western standards of women's empowerment.

Indeed, when writing about Muslim women's empowerment from the outside perspective of a Westerner, it is difficult to prevent Western ideals and narratives from creeping in. Discovering whether Kabul women have an organic understanding of

empowerment is nearly impossible, as questions on the subject are naturally framed from a Western perspective, which provides the framework and terminology. As Bahman said, ‘It is difficult to fight for something you have never experienced’ⁱ, and Kabul women who have no experience with empowerment naturally cannot define it. The four women profiled had all been well educated and exposed to Western ideals and narratives on the subject, and were able to frame their responses in ways a Western researcher would understand easily. However, in recording their responses, I think a precaution is necessary; an outsider (in this case, me) will likely frame questions in ways that are biased towards Western understandings of empowerment as a concept.

To Anisa Rasouly, empowerment means that women have access to education and employment. However, she is the most conservative of the women profiled, and believes that empowerment also means being able to manage work and all the demands of a family life. Empowerment is awareness of rights, responsibilities, and ‘authority’. By authority, Rasouly refers to a woman’s ability to occupy a position of power without threats or men questioning her fitness for the role.ⁱⁱ

To Farrukh Leqa, the youngest woman at 23, empowerment means literally being a powerful, active woman who helps other women. For Leqa, empowerment is more than simply raising one’s own sense of status and accomplishment – for her, it means helping other women, and negotiating on the behalf of women who cannot or will not do so themselves. Leqa cites the importance of respect, something all the women felt was important, but were not accustomed to getting. Respect for oneself, respect for others, and receiving respect in return was Leqa’s idea of true empowerment, because it represents a certain comfort in one’s social role.ⁱⁱⁱ

Of the four women featured, Seema Ghani and Zuhra Bahman were most confident in expressing empowerment, and most comfortable with their social identification. Ghani believes that empowerment is not simply placing women in government positions and allowing them to freely run businesses – she lists the same figures cited by international organizations and government reports that boast of the number of women in parliament, and the number of women’s organizations and female entrepreneurs. For Ghani, much of this is simply showboating, and true empowerment means that these women are taken seriously, listened to, and respected. She believes that

measuring empowerment in Kabul is difficult, since women have never been taken seriously enough to be given truly meaningful positions in government, and have not had the chance to empower themselves.^{iv} She herself one of the few exceptions.

Zuhra Bahman, like Ghani, is extremely intelligent, ambitious, and driven. As a shrewd businesswoman, her focus is more on building a successful company and employing those who both need work and can bring marketable assets to her business. In ‘doing business’ however, and doing it well, she herself is a display of an empowered Kabul woman, bucking social norms (de-identifying from the social role assigned to her by virtue of her gender) to do what she is good at, and what she wants to do. Bahman is comfortable owning her authority as the head of her company and has no trouble ordering men around, or firing them if they disobey her. She has no problem stepping outside ‘acceptable’ social boundaries for women, and in doing so fits a much more Western definition of empowerment. She understands the complexities of empowerment to Kabul women however, noting that because there are lower expectations for women, a whole generation has been raised without a model of empowerment in a more Western sense. Bahman says that girls cannot fight for things they have never experienced, making the fight for women’s empowerment in Kabul much more challenging than a simple battle for more equal treatment. For Bahman, empowerment begins on a much more basic level: teaching girls and women to believe in their own self-worth and abilities, and encouraging them to think for themselves.^v

3.3 SELF-EFFICACY BELIEFS

An important component of empowerment is personal agency, and people’s beliefs in their own capabilities to exercise control over events that affect their lives (Bandura 1989: 1,175). Self-efficacy beliefs determine human motivation, effect, and action, since much human behavior is regulated by forethought, and the embodiment of cognized goals (ibid). Personal goal setting is influenced by an individual’s self-appraisal of his or her own capabilities. An actor’s belief in his or her own self-efficacy also determines levels of motivation, as reflected in the amount of effort exerted and perseverance in the face of challenges (Bandura 1989: 1,176). Individuals who see

themselves as ineffectual are more likely to visualize scenarios that undermine their own performances or capabilities by envisioning what could go wrong. When faced with obstacles, people who suffer from strong self-doubts are more likely to abandon or lessen their efforts, while those who believe strongly in their own abilities are more likely to exert greater efforts to master the challenges they face (ibid).

All of the women presented in this research had strong senses of self-worth, and high assessments of their own capabilities. Seema Ghani was proud of her work at the Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee and believed strongly in the work she was doing. She felt that she was working towards a more accountable government and a better city for her children. Since she joined the Committee, the organization had issued 110 recommendations, 78 per cent of which were implemented or in the process of being implemented. Ghani said her job and the impact that it was having gave her hope, because it proved that there are people in government willing to accept change and listen to people who know how to fight corruption. Even those resisting the recommendations do not want to re-named in the next 6 month report naming corrupt organizations.

Before her work fighting corruption, Ghani was the Director of Budgets at the Ministry of Finance, essentially in charge of Afghanistan's money. She said that the MoF was at its best when she was there. She helped lay the structure, foundation, reforms, and first real budget. She said she took credit for any good things coming out of the MoF. Ghani was extremely confident in her abilities in a variety of professional capacities and took great pride in her accomplishments.^{vi}

Zuhra Bahma was quietly confident in her own abilities as a CEO and manager, and of all the women interviewed, she was the most articulate and assertive. Despite this, she said in our interview that all the positive things she had done in her company, and all the advancements in government are a façade. She believes that the mentality of the majority of Afghans is the same as it was under the Taliban – the same men who wear suits and discuss women's rights married their daughters off during Taliban rule, claiming they were going to be kidnapped.^{vii} Though she is more than certain of her own abilities, she is extremely aware of the limitations of Kabul society, and seems to be the most practical minded thinker of all the women interviewed.

Farrukh Leqa was least certain of her own self-efficacy, though she was the youngest by a fair amount. She had yet to firmly establish a career, which went a long way towards establishing empowerment for these women. She believed strongly in her abilities as a writer, enough that she thought her ideas and writings were dangerous for her to promote. She believed she had the ability to influence other women to question their status and seek to improve their situations, indicating a strong belief in her abilities in her chosen profession.

Anisa Rasouly, though she dismissed in-depth discussion of empowerment, believed strongly in her own self-efficacy. When asked how men reacted to her judgments, she was very direct. Men who come before her for judgment have not observed the rules of law, her area of expertise. She explained that she must tell them what they did wrong and how they failed to observe the law. She is matter-of-fact in her assertion that men will accept her rulings because she is far more knowledgeable than they are. She is educated, gainfully employed, and listened to by her colleagues. As such, she believes that she is in a position of higher social standing than those who come before her for judgment. As a woman, she asserts that all she must do is put men in a situation where they must accept her judgments – each of which must be impartial and based on fact. Once she proves that she is not corrupt or influenced by anyone else, and men can see the transparency of the process, they tend to accept her judgments.^{viii}

I found these assertions surprising, but since Rasouly is reinforced by the judicial system in which she operates, her statement that the men have no choice but to accept her ruling is backed up. She has accepted the fact that her rulings will be questioned and fought by men who would likely not do so to a male judge, but does not see that as an impediment or even much of a concern. She clearly believes strongly that she is good at her job and her rulings are accurate and just. Though she may not feel comfortable labeling such confidence as empowerment, her assertions fit within academic parameters of the term.

Of all the women, Rasouly exercised the least amount of agency in getting to her position. She spoke of accepting that she could no longer act as a judge when the Taliban took power, and worded her return as being ‘allowed to take her position back’. Once in her position, Rasouly is forceful and direct in her rulings and confident in her right to be

there. However, she stressed more than any other woman the importance of being a good wife and mother as well as a worker. Her words suggest that she identified with socially accepted Kabul gender norms more closely than the other women, which made her agency and security in her position even more interesting. Her acceptance of women's lower social status and reduced social roles seemed to come from a practical standpoint. She stated in our interview that from a constitutional standpoint, there is no difference between men and women. From a practical standpoint however, there is a huge difference. Women face security issues, government opposition, and social resistance. Women and men go through the same processes to become judges, gain the same education and experience, but men can travel, work, and issues judgments in all the provinces, whereas women cannot. While pushing the boundaries of her assigned social identity as a Kabul woman, Rasouly also accepted the larger social structure in which she operates, and its limitations. Her empowerment was therefore more of a bargain between socially accepted norms, and a social identity that tested those boundaries only to the extent that she could continue to hold her position. By working within a framework the other women actively rejected, Rasouly was able to express her empowerment in a different way – a way that is more common for Kabul women. What makes Rasouly exceptional is the qualities that she used to get to her position, a position very few Kabul women will attain.

ⁱ Based on interview with Zuhra Bahman. Founder & CEO, Inteqal. Kabul, Afghanistan. 27 May 2013.

ⁱⁱ Based on interview with Anisa Rasouly. Director, Afghan Women Judges Association. Kabul, 5 May 2013.

ⁱⁱⁱ Based on interview with Farrukh Leqa. Journalist, IDLO. Kabul, Afghanistan. 18 May 2013.

^{iv} Based on interview with Seema Ghani. Executive Director of the Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee. Kabul, Afghanistan. 21 May 2013.

^v Based on interview with Zuhra Bahman. Founder & CEO, Inteqal. Kabul, Afghanistan. 27 May 2013.

^{vi} Based on interview with Seema Ghani. Executive Director of the Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee. Kabul, Afghanistan. 21 May 2013.

^{vii} Based on interview with Zuhra Bahman. Founder & CEO, Inteqal. Kabul, Afghanistan. 27 May 2013.

^{viii} Based on interview with Anisa Rasouly. Director, Afghan Women Judges Association. Kabul, 5 May 2013.

4. OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES

4.1 GENDERED OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES

In achieving their own definitions of empowerment, each woman exercised considerable agency in negotiating opportunity structures in Kabul. Only women with powerful senses of self, great determination, and belief in their own abilities take advantage of such opportunity structures. There were several opportunity structures that were accessible to all the women profiled, and each woman took advantage of those structures in order to achieve her current status of empowerment. The first is the narrative perpetuated by the international community about Afghan women's struggles for empowerment and equality. The second opportunity structure was exposure to foreign norms and customs, whether Western or simply non-Afghan. The third was the acquisition of higher education. Three of the four women had or were in the process of obtaining Master's degrees. The third was finishing her Bachelor's and hoping to pursue a Master's in the future. The fourth and final opportunity structure I found relevant in these cases was the acquiescence or encouragement offered by key men in the women's lives, allowing them to take actions that pushed social boundaries and challenged gender norms.

Tilly and Tarrow made popular the concept of political opportunity structures, framing them as repeated features of contentious politics that, when combined in various settings, result in differing outcomes (Tilly & Tarrow 2007: 10, and Tilly & Tarrow in Demmers 2012:86). A political opportunity for a movement arises when political circumstances shift such that political actors are willing to support changes that they believe will strengthen their own institutional positions (McCammon 2001: 50). While working with the concept of opportunity structures as part of the structure within which these Kabul women exercised agency in an unusual way, I narrow and focus the scope of the opportunity structures down to *gendered* opportunity structures. McCammon identifies gendered opportunity structures as opportunities produced when shifting gender relations create gendered opportunities for women by altering attitudes about the appropriate roles of women in society (McCammon 2001: 51). As every aspect of social life in Kabul is separated by gender, gendered opportunity structures are the most

targeted way to identify the opportunities the women seized upon to empower themselves.

4.2 FULFILLING A WESTERN NARRATIVE

I argue that ‘shifting gender relations’, and new concepts of women’s social identities in Kabul were discussed by Western organizations and individuals, creating a narrative of women exercising agency to demand better treatment. Because women were being discussed, they were placed in the public sphere, and the women interviewed uniquely seized upon the opportunity to satisfy that narrative by stepping into roles not previously thought to be appropriate for women.

Reports by NGOS, INGOs, and government agencies speak of Afghan women’s struggle for a better future. They assign an agency to Afghan women that only few seem to actually exercise. Amnesty International (2013) reports that “Afghan women are determined to keep fighting for their human rights and to ensure they are central to the current peace and reconciliation talks”. In 2002, the U.N. reported that “new opportunities for women to reclaim their rights as active participants in governance” were opening up (2002).

The narrative is fairly prevalent among international organizations – Afghan women are struggling to gain and keep their rights. While it is impossible to comment on Kabul women as uniform in any way (and this paper is explicitly averse to doing so), based on my own observations while living and working in Kabul, and those of the women interviewed, they are the very few that do consciously fight for women’s rights, empowerment, and equality through their work, actions, and writings.

By moving into roles generally not thought suitable for women, the women profiled subtly shifted the social order in their own circles, reinforcing their own sense of empowerment, and enabling them to continue testing social boundaries. Since they are among few women who do, they do not represent a larger shifting of social order and gender boundaries, but they do influence gender dynamics within their own social professional, and family circles. What led these women to step into these narratives?

What experiences or traits did they have that encouraged them to do what few Kabul women do?

4.3 EXPOSURE TO NON-AFGHAN IDEAS AND CUSTOMS

The common thread I found for each of them was that they had at least traveled abroad to countries that are less restrictive than Afghanistan. Zuhra Bahman and Seema Ghani were educated in the U.K., and Farrukh Leqa and Anisa Rasouly had traveled outside Afghanistan. The exposure to other social systems and norms was a commonality that influenced their beliefs on the proper roles for women in Kabul.

Farrukh Leqa's tenacity in the face of opposition is partially credited to time spent in Pakistan, India, and Iran. She traveled there for work and saw that women her age had more freedom of speech, and awareness of presentation and self. She says that she sometimes thinks she would have been better born a boy – she would have opportunities, access, and authority. The simple realization that things are so different for her because of her gender and place of birth is what inspires her to continue writing about women's rights in Kabul, and speaking out about the importance of empowering women.

She understands that life for women is different in other places and, whether consciously or not, she has seized the opportunity that presented itself when the international community began discussing women's rights in Kabul. The fact that women are being talked about brings women's issues to the forefront and makes it normal that Kabul women would themselves be discussing and writing about empowerment and women's rights.

Leqa began working against her family's wishes, and had to struggle to leave the house every day. Because she is able to bring in a good salary, she has permission to work, but the money she earns go directly to the men in her family. They take it based on the claim that it is their permission that allows her to work, so the money she earns does not belong to her. Leqa chooses to continue working however, because she believes that she is a good writer, that her ideas are dangerous to men because they represent intelligent, rational thought coming from a woman, and so she has a duty to keep writing.

She encourages other women to find what they love doing and are good at. She pays for her younger sister to be able to paint, her passion.ⁱ

Anisa Rasouly attended Kabul University like Leqa, but had also traveled and spent time in Peshawar, where social and gender norms are different from those in Kabul.ⁱⁱ Her understanding of her own social role, and the agency she exercises in empowering herself is less of a proselyting type, and more that of a woman who is confident in her own abilities to perform a job she has trained for and believes she is effective in. She took advantage of international narratives of women's empowerment insofar as she stepped back into her role as a judge and authority figure in the justice system, but was slightly more willing to let the system open that position back up for her.

4.4 EDUCATION ABROAD

Experience abroad was an important factor in exposing all the women to social and gender norms they would not otherwise have experienced, but two of the women obtained higher education abroad, picking up not only innately learned social norms, but actively taught ones. They received education at European standards, which are more demanding and thorough than those at Kabul University simply by virtue of having more resources and diversity. Because these women were educated in Europe, they received a full experience of agency and empowerment in a Western sense – which translated to a more active and aware promotion of what empowerment is, and how they should express it in Kabul. It gave them the tools to be confident and assertive in their assessment of their own capabilities and worth.

Seema Ghani left Afghanistan with her family in 1990 for the U.K., where she lived for 12 years and completed her Bachelor's and Master's. While working in the U.K., she set up a charity working with refugee camps in Pakistan, focusing on children who were orphaned because of war. Though she came back to Kabul permanently in 2002, she spent a number of her formative years in Europe, receiving a European education, and becoming accustomed to European social and gender norms. Her perceptions of the appropriate roles for women in society are shaped in Western understandings, giving her a deeper sense of what she ultimately believes is

empowerment for women. Ghani had the experience of living Western gender norms for over a decade, making a transition back to Kabul gender norms shocking and troublesome. For her however, there was never a question of whether returning was the right thing. She came back with high hopes for Kabul, wanting to be part of sweeping change, of a big cultural movement. She was disappointed when her hopes failed to materialize, but says she hopes her children will be able to walk around Kabul in jeans and t-shirts – both her boys and her girls. The dream that she has is for her children to be able to live the social and gender norms she experienced in the U.K., and that hope is what keeps her in Kabul, trying to make change through her work and personal life.ⁱⁱⁱ

Zuhra Bahman attained her Master's degree in the U.K. as well. She is currently halfway through her PhD, making her the most highly educated of the women interviewed. Her education gave her the confidence to assert herself in situations where men question her authority, especially in her business, because she has the tools to reason, assess, and express herself on a higher level than those around her, who did not have the same education and exposure to ideas and information. In our interview, Bahman said that people educated in Kabul sometimes don't have the same analytical skills because the Afghan education system does not teach them to think, and women are socially restricted from expressing themselves. Women especially often don't have much, if any, education, making it harder for them to openly discuss important issues, or even to think further on a topic and educate themselves. Bahman stands out from the crowd, because she has keenly developed critical thinking and analytical skills. Her educational background, like Seema Ghani's, taught her how to think, rather than what to think – a distinction she makes between herself and the majority of the women she interacts with in Kabul.^{iv}

4.5 THE ROLE OF MEN

Though perhaps strange to label as an opportunity structure, the attitude of men around the women who were successful is an important lens into their relative success. Because men ultimately hold social power in Kabul, women who successfully exercise their agency to empower themselves are able to do so because certain key men around

them allow them to do so. It is difficult to credit the women's success to pure agency, since the social structure in which they operate is rigidly patriarchal. Indeed, empowerment is so rare, because there must be the perfect match of determined, capable women, fighting to exercise their agency, and a loosening of the rigid social structure that is built to keep them in their place. Men have the power in Kabul, but three out of the four women specifically mentioned their fathers' role in their empowerment process.

'The importance of men can't be overstated: confident, secure men are crucial as a driving force behind women. If my father, husband, and brother weren't who they were, I wouldn't be who I am today.'

Zuhra Bahman deliberately spoke of the men in her life as catalysts for encouraging her to explore and express her empowerment. She credited her father for being secure in his manhood, and not feeling the need to belittle the women in his life to reassure himself that he was in charge. She said that he traveled, he fought in wars, he did everything a man is 'supposed to do'. His experiences and self-confidence were passed on to her. Under the rule of the Taliban, her father created a life for her and her brother completely sheltered from abuse and neglect. He provided books on every subject, and spoke openly about sexuality, politics, religion, etc. He encouraged his children to express their personalities, regardless of gender, and did not encourage nor discourage them to pursue any form of religion or political thought.^v

Bahman attributes her self-respect to her father, who by her accounts, respected and loved his family. She says that the fact that she gives herself freedom to be who she believes she is and pursue things she enjoys doing also comes from her father. She says she grew up unafraid of men because of her father, which imparted a confidence to her that few other women were lucky enough to have. Bahman says many women's relationships with men are based on fear because they have always been treated as bodies, rather than humans. All of the qualities that made her so remarkable, and so successful as a businesswoman and pusher of accepted social boundaries and gender norms, she attributes to being raised by a man who encouraged her in every way, rather than stifling her or giving her ideas of what it means to be a woman.

Bahman was the most eloquent and verbose when it comes to the subject of men's roles in empowering women, but Seema Ghani and Farrukh Leqa also brought up the importance of men in their lives. Ghani did not go into details, but stated that her family left Kabul in 1990 because her father was in danger due to his political beliefs.^{vi} It is not necessary to know the exact circumstances to make several reasonable deductions. The actions of Ghani's father were those of someone who had strong beliefs and refused to hide them in order to make his own life, and those of his family, more secure or less difficult. Ghani's father brought his family to another continent because he believed that he had a right to express himself and what he thought openly. That kind of example can be seen in Ghani herself, who speaks her mind and stands firm even if it means that she receives threats against her person or her children. Because her position puts her in a very public setting when she discusses reports her organization releases criticizing government institutions, she is an easy target for those who wish to take revenge or try to put her in her place. Her house was broken into once during an extensive investigation on corruption in the Kabul banking system, and she believes the intent was to intimidate her. She refuses to be frightened, saying only that she increases security measures for her children because their safety is the only thing that frightens her. She believes that her position, rather than her gender, makes her a target, but believes strongly in the worth of what she is doing.^{vii} That attitude can reasonably be partially attributed to origins in seeing her father fight for what he believed was right, even in the face of threats and danger.

Farrukh Leqa's experiences with men were the least positive. She requested that more personal details be left out of this paper, and out of respect for her wishes, I will only outline the importance men had in her empowerment experience. She faced resistance from the men in her family, though ultimately she brought in good income, and the prospect of more money was more compelling than the more rigid interpretations of the appropriate roles for women her father adhered to. In her case, she pushed for the ability to work outside the home, and was granted that opportunity. Though it was her initiative to attempt to work outside, it was ultimately her father who decided that she was allowed to do so.^{viii}

For many women, not only are the men in their lives not supportive and encouraging, they flat out refuse to let them work, socialize, or express their agency in any meaningful way. Kabul women, even the fiercely intelligent and ambitious ones, simply don't have the physical strength or social capital to go against the orders of the men in their families. For the women to be able to express their agency, they must be allowed to take the first steps of entering the social sphere, and a man must allow them to do so.

ⁱ Based on interview with Farrukh Leqa. Journalist, IDLO. Kabul, Afghanistan. 18 May 2013.

ⁱⁱ Based on interview with Anisa Rasouly. Director, Afghan Women Judges Association. Kabul, 5 May 2013.

ⁱⁱⁱ Based on interview with Seema Ghani. Executive Director of the Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee. Kabul, Afghanistan. 21 May 2013.

^{iv} Based on interview with Zuhra Bahman. Founder & CEO, Inteqal. Kabul, Afghanistan. 27 May 2013.

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^{viii} Based on interview with Farrukh Leqa. Journalist, IDLO. Kabul, Afghanistan. 18 May 2013.

5. AUTHORITY

5.1 OFFICIAL POSITIONS OF AUTHORITY

I turn now to the concept of authority, and how these women use it in ways unique to Kabul social norms. Two of the women, Anisa Rasouly and Seema Ghani, occupy positions that by their nature, convey the women a degree of authority and command respect. As a judge, Rasouly occupies a position traditionally reserved for men. Her rulings must be followed by both men and women, because of the social power and respect bestowed upon her position. As the director of the Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee, Seema Ghani is in a position to issue assessments on government agencies and institutions, assessments that carry a certain political and social weight. Her position also bestows a certain degree of authority and respect, and her occupation of that role is an anomaly in a society where such a visible public position would ordinarily be occupied by a man.

Authority in the workplace is important, because the argument can be made that more women in positions of authority could contribute to gender equality in general (Bygren 2012: 795). Workplace authority can be defined in many ways, from the right to hire and fire, the ability to set rates of pay, the responsibility of supervising work of subordinates, the active participation in policy decisions in the workplace, or the possession of a formal position of authority, defined by Bygren as an executive title (2012: 796).

The women working in official positions of authority were comfortable with their roles there. When asked how men received them, whether they were confused, uncomfortable, or angry at the prospect of having to work for, or listen to, women because of the authority their position commanded, each of their replies was to the effect that their authority was accepted because there really was not an option not to do so. As Ghani said, women have never been taken seriously enough to be given a significant number of powerful positions, so it is difficult to assess how men's reactions to their positions are based on perceptions of the appropriateness of women for that role.ⁱ

Zuhra Bahman, who occupies what Bygren would characterize as an official position of authority based on her status as the top executive in her company, faced more

resistance to her authority than Ghani or Rasouly. She fulfilled every qualifier outline in Bygren's characterization of workplace authority, but the men she hired and fired, set rates of pay for, and supervised, actively resisted her, tried to intimidate and antagonize her, and even tried to sabotage the work her company was tasked with carrying out.

In one instance recounted during our interview, Bahman's company was conducting a research project in Herat, involving a 200-question survey to be distributed to 5 categories of people, with 100 people in each category. The man she placed in charge of the research team flat-out refused to carry out her instructions, telling her that he would ask some of the questions to people in one category. He insisted on telling the rest of the team to follow his orders, rather than Bahman's, so she dismissed him in front of the team as a warning to the rest of them to follow her orders.ⁱⁱ Bahman was extremely aware of her authority, and was careful in reinforcing it repeatedly in front of her employees. Her deliberate and continual displays of ultimate authority firmly established her as the head of her company to all the employees, even the ones who initially believed that as a woman, she was not strong enough or capable enough to lead effectively.

Acting comfortably in their authority was to me, the final step for these women's empowerment. Their negotiation of the opportunity structures available in Kabul had led them up the career ladder and raised their social status to the point where they could occupy positions that conveyed authority to them. Exercising their agency to effectively occupy these official positions of authority placed them on a more equal social footing with the men around them. Their occupation of positions of authority could suggest that more women would be able to follow them, pushing social boundaries and accepted gender norms for future generations of women.

ⁱ Based on interview with Seema Ghani. Executive Director of the Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee. Kabul, Afghanistan. 21 May 2013.

ⁱⁱ Based on interview with Zuhra Bahman. Founder & CEO, Inteqal. Kabul, Afghanistan. 27 May 2013.

6. ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

This research has been an attempt to fill in details regarding the circumstances in which women in Kabul seize the opportunity to empower themselves. It is an attempt to break from generalizations that tend to paint Afghan women in solidly defined camps; empowered women fighting for change, and victims without agency. While there are excellent articles and interviews portraying Afghan women as the complex and varied group of individuals that they are, this tried to go deeper into how and why certain empowered women achieved the success or empowerment they have today.

In approaching this subject, I found that I could not in good conscience place myself definitively on the Hollis Matrix. The women profiled in this writing are powerful agents, women who got where they are today by seizing opportunities, and overcoming incredible challenges and odds. Their struggle was remarkable because the structure in which they are actors is rigid, patriarchal, and firmly entrenched. Kabul social structure permeates nearly every level of social and political life, making those who in any way deviate from accepted norms powerful agents who have navigated solid challenges to defy the structure that attempts to keep them firmly in place. Structuration, or the acknowledgment that actors make conscious decisions within structural boundaries (whether to ‘play by the rules’ or defy them), is the only lens through which I could reasonably observe and describe the women’s abilities to deviate from accepted norms and carve out their own social identities within the larger social structure.

In doing so, the women de-identified from the roles that society gave them, and created new social identities by pushing the boundaries for accepted gender norms. They do not represent a social movement, or any larger process of female de-identification from rigid norms governing acceptable roles for women, but their uniqueness is what makes them so interesting. In the process of de-identifying, the women faced considerable resistance from men and even women who are frightened or intimidated by powerful personalities bucking social structure.

That process of de-identification from the rigid gender norms governing Kabul society was the foundation for these women’s empowerment. To become empowered in Kabul, a woman must be acutely aware of her agency and her abilities to exercise it in

ways she sees fit. Each woman had her own definition of empowerment, which in a sense legitimized the idea that they were all intelligent enough to have arrived at their own definition of empowerment and were using their agency to gain it. Bahman and Ghani, educated abroad, were more apt to describe empowerment in terms that convey passing it on to other women. Leqa, as the youngest, was the most idealistic in terms of improving the status of future Kabul women, but described empowerment mainly in terms of respect. Her position was not high enough to accord her the official respect that Ghani, Bahman, and Rasouly were accorded, so her priority was placed on gaining that respect. Rasouly spoke less about empowerment as a concept, and was concerned more with performing well in her job as a judge, and eroding preconceptions about women's capabilities as judges and social actors.

One of the key markers of empowerment, strong self-efficacy beliefs, featured prominently in all women. They all firmly believed in their own intelligence, competence, and capabilities, and were tenacious in their pursuit of their goals. They all faced setbacks and obstacles, but all of them exhibited high levels of motivation and a willingness to devote large amounts of time pursuing those goals.

Their success in achieving personal levels of empowerment is due to a strong sense of agency, and the belief that as individual actors, their actions had consequences and they were capable of going against a rigid system designed to keep pre-assigned social roles intact. The women were remarkable because they are the few social actors willing to question the system and demand social roles denied them by the existing structure.

Though the social structure in which these women operate is designed to keep actors within their assigned social roles, I identified several opportunity structures the women took advantage of in order to empower themselves. Some of these opportunity structures are available to all Kabul women, and some were only available to the women profiled because of their specific conditions. I discovered in my research however, that a variety of circumstances had converged in order to create opportunity structures, and the women who took advantage of them had a mixture of traits including powerful senses of self, strong self-efficacy beliefs, and high levels of ambition.

Gendered opportunity structures, as described by McCammon, and utilized in my analysis as the appropriate framework for determining the circumstances empowered women used to their advantage, are produced by the altering of attitudes regarding the appropriate roles of women in society. There were several salient gendered opportunity structures that applied to the women interviewed.

The large international presence in Kabul has various effects on Kabul social structure. The mere presence of so many people raised and accustomed to different social norms and acceptable positions has an effect on the Kabul social structure by exposing those in it to different norms and standards. However, the international community has created a narrative of women's empowerment in Afghanistan (prompted perhaps by the fact that the situation for women's rights was heavily promoted as one of the reasons to invade in the first place). International and national organizations and government agencies have released reports documenting Afghan women's struggle for rights and empowerment, calling on the international community to stand with the women in their struggle. Zuhra Bahman was critical of this narrative, asking rhetorically, 'How can women and girls fight for a reality they have never experienced?' I believe that the creation of this narrative provided an opportunity that the women I interviewed uniquely seized, stepping into the roles created when discussion of those roles placed them in the public consciousness.

Whether consciously or not, the women took advantage of the opportunity created by placing women's issues in a prominent light. By talking about women's struggle (often as though women in Afghanistan were acting in solidarity) to empower themselves and gain or retain basic rights, women as a topic of social conversation was normalized. These women were able to step in and take up that narrative, taking advantage of the opportunity that was not previously available to them, and in the process, partially satisfying that narrative.

Zuhra Bahman was able to implement company policies that favor women, that encourage women to be working mothers, and encourage men to see women in the workplace as normal, and women as more than just mothers. She encouraged interaction between the sexes and was able to do so because her employees grew accustomed to hearing about women's rights, women's empowerment, and the struggle for women to

find new roles in Kabul society. Even while they resisted Bahman, they did eventually accept her policies, an acceptance that could have been much more difficult if the international community had not been talking loudly of women's issues both in Kabul, and from Afghanistan to a global audience.

The second opportunity structure that these women took advantage of was education. They all actively pursued higher education, with the awareness that doing so would provide them with the tools they needed to be confident in their capabilities and goals. Two of them were educated abroad, an experience that exposed them to social structures, norms, and accepted roles vastly different from those in Kabul. The two women who obtained higher education in Kabul still were able to travel abroad and see different norms. That exposure to a different social structure was a key catalyst in encouraging most of the women to question the roles assigned them in Kabul society. The importance was the exposure, although higher education in Europe produced a marked difference in the abilities of the women to express themselves, their goals, and their understandings of empowerment.

The final opportunity structure I found particularly relevant is the attitudes of key men in the women's lives. Because men are actors with much more freedom in the social structure these women operate within, their roles with regards to women are either a reinforcement of that structure, or a leniency. All the women were surrounded by men who defied social norms in some way, and either allowed or encouraged the women to exercise their agency. Each of the women are powerful social actors with strong sense of agency, but because their social status is so low in Kabul, they cannot exercise that agency without the cooperation of men. This is in a sense a crystallization of how structuration plays out in this analysis; the women, acting as agents, pushed the boundaries of the structure that constrained them, in turn subtly influencing that structure, while still working within its larger parameters.

These opportunity structures created openings for the women that they deliberately took advantage of in the process of empowerment. They made the conscious decision not to play by the rules of the social structure they were born into, and in doing so, they actively distanced themselves (de-identified) from the gender norms of that structure. They decidedly do not represent Kabul women, nor do they represent

empowered Afghan women. They are unique individuals from different backgrounds and circumstances who arrived at their status of empowerment through a variety of experiences and decisions. By focusing on the individual experiences of several women, this research attempted to broaden understandings of Afghan women as complex individuals. These understandings are important to keep in mind when conducted larger, quantitative research on Afghan women. While generalizations in any sense run the risk of drawing false parallels, the international community has made numerous pledges to Afghan women. Keeping them requires a deeper understanding of the women as the complex, varied humans that they are. This research aims to contribute toward that understanding.

7. LOOKING FORWARD: PROJECTIONS FOR THE POST-2014 TROOP WITHDRAWAL

2014 is a looming deadline in Afghanistan, a date surrounded by uncertainty and fear. With the withdrawal of almost all international troops, a huge industry for Afghan workers will disappear, and Afghan National Security Forces will be left to deal with security threats without the manpower, equipment, and training they have come to rely on from the international community. Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have issued warnings that the situation for Afghan women is precarious, and their security post-2014 depends on the continued commitment of the international community to their situation. I asked the women profiled in this research what their thoughts on the post-2014 situation.

Anisa Rasouly did not offer a projection on the situation, but simply laid out the facts. If the Afghan government can take on responsibilities, primarily security, and some large aid donors stay in country, Rasouly thought there was a good chance women's situations would stay the same and gradually improve. However, she acknowledged that there was a good chance the government is not up to the task, and spoke of fears that things would return to the way they were under Taliban rule.ⁱ

Farrukh Leqa was fairly certain that things will be worse for women post-2014. She compared Afghanistan to a baby that must be carried around and taken care of, saying that nothing is possible without the international community. She pointed out that it is difficult to accurately determine the role of the international community, which focuses its work in safe places like Kabul, Herat, and Mazar. She believes Afghans cannot improve the security situation on their own. Though she believes life will be worse for women next year, she says she will continue to write and express her mind, and will keep trying to raise awareness of women's empowerment through writing, reporting, and living by example.ⁱⁱ

Seema Ghani was adamant that international funds and presence were necessary after 2014. She said that if Afghanistan is left without outside support at this point, the Taliban will return and all gains will be lost. She stressed that the Afghan economy cannot grow on its own, but that economic growth is necessary to prevent insurgency. When more youth have jobs, security, income to survive and be proud of, they have no reason to join the insurgent movement. Afghanistan is not capable of creating those jobs on its own, so if the international community commits to staying in some capacity, she believes there is a chance for the country to find its feet eventually. She spoke of her ultimate goal in life; to put her feet up, read a book, and relax, knowing that her children are safe and able to walk around Kabul in jeans and t-shirts. She said she wasn't certain if that would ever happen in her life, but hoped that her children would experience it.ⁱⁱⁱ

Zuhra Bahman took a slightly different view. She said that there is no moderate or conservative Afghanistan that will lose power because international money is not coming in. She says money will be there, though there may be fewer programs that systematically teach human and women's rights. She believes that everybody in Afghanistan is extreme, and any progress made in terms of human rights is a façade, a show for the international community. Once Afghans do not need to adhere to Western standards to win Western money for projects, they will stop caring about human rights, and social equality. Bahman says that women are not united in fighting for their rights.

She blames the artificial economy created by aid money, saying that it teaches women nothing and hurts them in the long run. She calls Afghanistan an aid society, where people are trained from childhood to give the answers a person asking questions expects to hear. If Afghans are told to make a gender policy, they will cut and paste one and present it as their policy without understanding or caring about it.

Women are given preference in project funding, so do not have to work as hard as men to produce a higher quality proposal. They are praised as businesswomen, but they do not develop and hone their skills and abilities in the way men do. Women's organizations and companies compete with each other to obtain funding for projects, rather than uniting. This has left women scattered and fragmented, without the network to build a movement and collectively bargain for their rights and economic power after the international community leaves. Bahman says she is skeptical about women's futures in Afghanistan.^{iv}

There is no way to know how the situation will play out in 2014. As international observers, we can only wait to see what happens. The women presented here were all thoughtful, reasoned, and cautious when speaking of their projections for next year. The security situation and economic realities will affect them directly, but rather than allowing fear to govern their actions and plans, they simply accept that things will change and that their actions will help shape those changes. As the powerful agents they are, they will help shape the coming changes to Kabul and Afghan socio-political structure, and continue to define their roles in social life, rather than allowing them to be defined by others.

ⁱ Based on interview with Anisa Rasouly. Director, Afghan Women Judges Association. Kabul, Afghanistan. 5 May 2013.

ⁱⁱ Based on interview with Farrukh Leqa. Journalist, IDLO. Kabul, Afghanistan. 18 May 2013.

ⁱⁱⁱ Based on interview with Seema Ghani. Executive Director of the Anti-Corruption Monitoring and Evaluation Committee. Kabul, Afghanistan. 21 May 2013.

^{iv} Based on interview with Zuhra Bahman. Founder & CEO, Inteqal. Kabul, Afghanistan. 27 May 2013.

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