

**A MATTER OF INTERESTS:
GENDER AND THE POLITICS OF
PRESENCE IN AFGHANISTAN'S
*WOLESI JIRGA***



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Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	vii
1. Introduction	1
1.1 Overview	1
1.2 The “quota” debate: An assessment of affirmative action	2
1.3 “Politics of presence” versus “Politics of ideas”?	2
2. Methodology	5
3. Background: Women’s Political Participation in Afghanistan, 1964-2005	7
4. Women’s Participation: The Current Context	9
4.1 The politics of presence: Women in parliament	9
4.2 The politics of presence: Men’s perspectives on reserved seats and women’s participation	10
4.3 The politics of presence: Reservation misconceived?	11
4.4 The presence of politics: Motivations and obstacles	13
5. Parliamentary Affiliations: The Articulation of Collective Interests	17
5.1 Leadership issues: Personality politics, patronage, reputation	17
5.2 “Outside” influence: Parties and the restriction of political autonomy	20
5.3 Obstacles to a “politics of ideas”: SNTV, ethnicity and the mantra of national unity	22
6. The Role of Representation: “Constituency” and its Connotations	25
6.1 Issues of representation: Geographical factors	25
6.2 Issues of representation: Networks of support	27
7. Executive Indifference and Intervention	29
7.1 Executive limitations: Spaces for women in “women’s spaces”	29
7.2 Executive intervention: Perceptions of corruption	31
8. International Assistance	33
8.1 Needs and mechanisms: International perspectives	33
8.2 Needs and mechanisms: MP perspectives	36
9. Conclusions and Ways Forward	39
References	41
Recent Publications from AREU	44

Glossary

<i>khedmat</i>	service
<i>Meshrano Jirga</i>	upper house of the Afghan parliament
<i>madrasa</i>	religious school
<i>mujahiddin</i>	holy warriors fighting in <i>jihad</i> , or holy war
<i>maulawi</i>	Islamic theologian
<i>qawm</i>	kinship group, often a tribe or a sub-division of a tribe
<i>ulama</i>	scholar
<i>wakil</i>	representative
<i>Wolesi Jirga</i>	lower house of the Afghan parliament

Acronyms

CEDAW	Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women
FES	Friedrich Ebert Stiftung
GoA	Government of Afghanistan
IPU	Inter-Parliamentary Union
IRI	International Republican Institute
MJ	<i>Meshrano Jirga</i>
MOWA	Ministry of Women's Affairs
NAPWA	National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan
NDI	National Democratic Institute
PDPA	People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan
PGI(s)	practical gender interests
SGL(s)	strategic gender interests
SNTV	Single Non-Transferable Vote
SUNY	State University of New York
UNDP- SEAL	United Nations Development Programme Support to the Establishment of Afghan Legislature
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WJ	<i>Wolesi Jirga</i>

Executive Summary

This paper contends that, in spite of women's sizable presence in Afghanistan's *Wolesi Jirga*, the representation of women's gender interests remains minimal. This is not to say that their political influence has not increased over the last 18 months, but rather that women have not generally used this newfound influence to promote their gendered interests. The purpose of this study is to assess why this might be the case, and to suggest ways in which these interests might be more substantively raised in the future.

Following an introduction to the theoretical framework of the paper, and to women's historical political participation in Afghanistan, the study is divided into six sections:

Women's participation in the current context

Women have been in parliament for 18 months, and their presence has been widely appreciated as having contributed positively to the legislature as a whole. However, their presence has been somewhat undermined by negative perceptions of the reserved seats system. Further, divisions between women have been starkly emphasised, countering assumptions that they would stand together as a consolidated block. It is in this context that the potential representation of women's gender interests is situated, and obstacles to this representation are identified in four further areas:

Parliamentary affiliations:

The articulation of collective interest

Women's gender interests are collective interests, and as such are most successfully represented by issues-based blocks, as opposed to individuals. However, neither issues-based blocks nor collective political platforms have been strongly consolidated in Afghanistan's political history. Parties exist, but they are far from "institutionalised" and are seen in a negative light by the majority of Afghans who associate these groups with the atrocities

committed during the war years. As such, the formation of parliamentary groups and issues-based blocks has been highly problematic, and has not resulted in the emergence of potential spaces for the substantive representation of women's gender interests. Factors of ethnicity and "outside" influence also contribute significantly to a lack of representation of these interests.

The role of representation:

Constituency and its connotations

The connection between Members of Parliament (MPs) and their constituents, and their potential to represent constituent interests (and by extension women's gender interests), is generally weak. This relates to various factors, which can be divided in two broad categories. The first of these pertains to geographical factors, such as *where* an MP's constituency is located, whether they are able to visit their constituency frequently and whether the security situation in that constituency affects the issues they are able to raise. The second category is that of MPs' networks of support, which looks at *who* the MPs' constituents are and how MP-constituent relations are maintained. The overlapping issues of patronage, service provision and hospitality are key to this discussion.

Executive indifference and intervention

Even when women's gender interests are raised in parliament, they very rarely become legislation. One reason for this is the lack of attention paid by the executive to gender issues. Female representation in the executive is extremely limited, there being only one female minister—the minister for women's affairs. This containment is highly detrimental to the raising of women's gender interests in other fields. A second reason concerns the perceptions of corruption at both executive and legislative levels, and indeed between these levels. Whether these perceptions are substantiated

or not is unclear, but if it is *assumed* that the only way to influence governmental decisions is through payment of bribes, making positive results practically impossible to achieve without correspondingly available funds, the motivation to exert this influence (for the promoting of a gender agenda, for example) will be insignificant.

International assistance

The international community has made specific efforts to increase the potential for women's gender interests to be raised in parliament, through capacity-building exercises, workshops and other relevant activities. However, assumptions about the needs of female MPs are often made and assistance is given without an acknowledgement of the pre-eminence of patronage in the functioning of the legislature. As such, it creates unrealistic expectations on the part of both MPs and international actors.

Conclusions and Ways Forward

The following suggestions are made as to how women's gender interests may be more effectively raised within parliament:

1. Reserved seats. Assuming that seats will be reserved for women in the next elections, it is recommended that the government and electoral body re-clarify publicly the procedure for reserved seats well in advance. Further, the reserved seats system should be identified as a temporary measure to compensate for past inequalities, and not a means through which to provide women with an unfair advantage.

2. Issues-based groups. Group representation needs to be encouraged if a broad-based endorsement of a gender agenda is to be put forward. The *substantive* representation of women's gender interests will require the institutional frameworks of solid issues-based groups or parties whose commitment to the representation of these interests is a key element of their policy platforms. Serious consideration needs to be given to how this could be achieved, given that issues-based groups, in general, have not been successfully established in Afghanistan's political history to date.

3. "Downwards" accountability. There should be an increased commitment to "downwards" accountability, on the part of international organisations, towards the recipients of programmes, as opposed to donors. Documents should be produced on a regular basis, intended for MP readership, detailing agencies' immediate plans for training and other forms of assistance. Further, it is suggested that a "right to information" campaign be initiated by MPs, in order to raise awareness of the need for transparency in the provision of assistance to parliament.

4. Mainstreaming of gender training. The limitations of training need to be more widely acknowledged, and training programmes streamlined to incorporate practical and immediately useful skills, such as the development of legislation. As such, gender should be fully integrated into all training sessions, in order to widen the application of a gender-sensitive approach and acknowledge that all parliamentary activities need to be considered in terms of gender equity.

5. Harmonisation of legislation on women's rights. Given that there is very little understanding of the various forms of legislation and treaty obligations that exist to promote women's rights, it is suggested that a compilation of these is made and presented to parliament. The forthcoming National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) may well address this and should be seen as a means to consolidate legislation promoting women's gender interests.

6. Women in the Executive/Supreme Court. President Hamid Karzai's commitment to women has been shown as lacking in substance. It is fundamental that he honour his promises to women MPs and bring more women into the Executive and Supreme Court. Further, it will be necessary to ensure that women's participation at this level is not limited to certain "women's spaces," such as MOWA, as there is a danger that women's contained presence will act instead as a boundary to encase women's gender concerns within entities, unable to penetrate other areas of executive activity.

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

Afghanistan's National Assembly is renowned for its sizeable presence of female parliamentarians. With 27 percent of seats reserved for women in the *Wolesi Jirga* (lower house, WJ) and one sixth of seats reserved in the *Meshrano Jirga* (upper house, MJ), Afghanistan ranks in the world's top 20 countries for numbers of women in parliament.¹ It far exceeds the regional average of 16.4 percent,² with a higher number of women parliamentarians than any other Muslim country and many Western countries.³ However, while the creation of political space for women represents a considerable milestone in the struggle for equal opportunities in Afghanistan, 18 months after the inauguration of parliament, the question remains as to how this space is being used.

Women's newfound political presence was widely documented at the time of their coming to parliament.⁴ However, little research has been undertaken on the developments that have occurred within the National Assembly since this time.⁵ During parliament's first two sessions, women did not automatically come together as a block. On the contrary, divisions according to ethnicity, region, political affiliation and language were starkly emphasised. The discrepancy between women's political presence, and their ability (or indeed willingness) to represent or prioritise their collective "gender interests," (see Box 1) has become evident.

The primary aim of this research has been to explore the ways in which women's gender interests have surfaced in parliament, if at all, during the last 18 months. In addition, the effect of the system of reserved seats for women on the representation of these interests is examined. It has become clear that the practice of fast-tracking women into the legislature through affirmative action has, in some way, affected their perceived legitimacy in office. It is also found that women's gender interests have not been *substantively* represented in parliament. This is perhaps to be expected given the short time since parliament has been established. However, there are particular obstacles preventing women and men from raising these interests.

This issues paper makes suggestions as to how these obstacles could be overcome. Four major areas are addressed: parliamentary affiliations, "constituency factors," executive indifference and intervention, and international assistance. Finally, the paper provides potential ways forward, aimed at international agencies, the government and parliamentarians themselves. Suggestions are made as to how women's gender interests may be more effectively raised within parliament in order to address past imbalances and enable the concerns of women in particular to be brought to light.

¹ Reynolds, A., Jones, L. and Wilder, A., 2005. *A Guide to Parliamentary Elections in Afghanistan*. p 10. Kabul: AREU.

² IPU. 2007a. "Women in National Parliaments." www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm (webpage) accessed 26 February 2007.

³ Rashid, A., 2006. "Afghanistan on the Brink." *New York Review of Books*, Vol. LIII, No. 11: 24.

⁴ NDI, 2006. "The September 2005 Parliamentary and Provincial Council Elections in Afghanistan." www.accessdemocracy.org, accessed 11 June 2006; Wilder, A., 2005. *A House Divided? Analysing the 2005 Afghan Elections*. Kabul: AREU; JEMB, 2005. "Final Report: National Assembly and Provincial Council Elections 2005." www.jemb.org, accessed 17 June 2006.

⁵ ICG conducted a study on Afghanistan's legislature in May 2006, but this was not focused specifically on gender dynamics in parliament. ICG, 2006. "Afghanistan's New Legislature: Making Democracy Work." (Asia Report No. 116) www.crisisgroup.org, accessed 11 December 2006. Various journalistic articles have also been produced but have typically focused on a few key individuals and have not comprised broad analyses.

1.2 The “quota” debate: An assessment of affirmative action

The reservation of seats for women in parliament has become increasingly prevalent worldwide. According to Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) statistics, parliamentary “quotas” or reserved seats for women were used in 23 countries in 2006.⁶ Officially, the system used in Afghanistan is the reserved seats system. This differs from statutory quotas in that it marks a constitutional provision to allocate a certain amount of seats to women legislators, rather than regulating the specific proportion of male and female candidates by all parties seeking parliamentary representation.⁷ The benefits and shortcomings of these kinds of affirmative action are nevertheless widely debated. Affirmative action can mark the first step towards restoring some form of equity, using preferential treatment for certain social groups as a means to compensate for their past exclusion in a process of righting historical injustices.⁸ Similarly, it can be used to overcome barriers which would otherwise prevent women from participating in political institutions,⁹ and in “fast-tracking” women’s political presence, to promptly redress quantitative gender imbalances within these institutions. Other arguments in favour of quota systems or

reserved seats focus on notions of equality, noting the need to address women’s right to political participation. However, this contention is not altogether helpful as it ignores the fact that giving special preference to certain groups in society is not a particularly “equal” approach.¹⁰ While the concept of a critical mass of 30 percent women in parliament implies that influence can be quantitatively assured, it does not allow for factors that obscure the link between women’s access to politics and their capacity to influence decision-making, let alone the link between women’s presence and their ability or willingness to promote their gender interests.¹¹

1.3 “Politics of presence” versus “Politics of ideas”?

Central to the debate on affirmative action is the recent shift, in terms of political representation in general, from a “politics of ideas” to a “politics of presence.”¹² Demands for women’s (and other minority groups’) equal political participation have come to replace the concept of a representation through ideas, political platforms, and corresponding policy formations.¹³ In Afghanistan’s new legislature, a considerable emphasis has been placed on *who* (i.e. particular social groups) is repre-

⁶ IPU. 2007b. *Women in Parliament in 2006: The year in perspective*. IPU: Geneva, www.ipu.org, accessed 5 February 2007.

⁷ Norris, P., 2006. *Opening the Door: Women leaders and constitution building in Iraq and Afghanistan*, p 5. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, John F. Kennedy School of Government.

⁸ Smith, D., 2005. *Finding Power: Gender and Women’s Political Participation in Rural Rajasthan, India*. (PhD Thesis), p 39. London: London School of Economics and Political Science.

⁹ Dahlerup, D., 2002. “Using Quotas to Increase Women’s Political Representation.” International IDEA, Women in Parliament, Stockholm (an updated version of the chapter, originally published in International IDEA’s Handbook: Women in Parliament Beyond Numbers, Stockholm, International IDEA, 1998), www.onlinewomeninpolitics.org, accessed 11 March 2007.

¹⁰ Tinker, I., 2004. “Quotas for women in elected legislatures: Do they really empower women?” In *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 27:531-546.

¹¹ Ibid. Afghanistan’s *Wolesi Jirga*, with 27 percent women’s seats, comes close to the critical mass target of 30 percent women in decision-making posts as set by the UN-facilitated Beijing Platform for Action in 1995. IPU, 2007b, op. cit.

¹² Phillips, A., 1995. *The Politics of Presence: The Political Representation of Gender, Ethnicity and Race*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

sented. Consequently, there is a distinct lack of focus on political platforms and very few issues-based alliances that cut across social groups.

Within the discourse of the “politics of presence,” there is often the assumption that all members of a minority group share identical interests.¹⁴ This argument is particularly applicable to the women of the *Wolesi Jirga*, who, contrary to the often romanticised portrayals in the Western media of the solidar-

ity of a persecuted group,¹⁵ are far from united as an homogenous block, but are instead divided across ethnic, class, linguistic, political and regional lines. The concept of multiple identities is important here, as people’s interests are often determined by the particular aspects of their identities they choose to prioritise at a given time.

Box 1. Gender Interests

Gender interests are collective interests that develop as a result of a given society’s construction of gender roles and relations. Both women and men have gender interests—interests that arise from their relative positions within gender hierarchies. It is important to note that women’s or men’s gender interests differ from women’s or men’s (other) interests, as the latter do not necessarily relate to their gender identity. While both women and men’s gender interests will be discussed throughout this study, an emphasis will be placed on the representation of women’s gender interests in parliament, as women’s sizable political presence in parliament (and their potential to articulate their gender interests therein) is a new phenomenon and as such requires analytical attention.

Promoting gender interests could involve changing inheritance laws to favour men and women equally, or institutionalising maternity or paternity leave, for example. One can divide the term into distinct categories: *practical* gender interests (PGIs), and *strategic* gender interests (SGIs). PGIs relate to immediate practical concerns and do not necessarily alter accepted norms of gender subordination. SGIs are linked to a more transformative agenda that challenges these norms. Therefore, prioritising PGIs might involve campaigning for the establishment of women’s clinics, and focusing on SGIs the lobbying for the creation and or implementation of legislation against domestic violence. It is important to note, however, that the two categories are inextricably linked. Addressing PGIs might lead to the improved strategic position of women more generally. Likewise, a change in strategic legislation may have a direct impact on women’s PGIs.

Sources:

Kabeer, N., 1994. *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought.*, pp 90-91. London and New York: Verso.

Molyneux, M., 1985. “Mobilisation without emancipation? Women’s interests, the State and Revolution in Nicaragua”. *Feminist Studies*, 11(2): 227-254.

Moser, C., 1989 “Gender Planning in the Third World: Meeting Strategic and Practical Gender Needs.” *World Development*, 17(11):1799-1825.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Phillips critiques this assumption in Ibid, 24.

¹⁵ Such is the perspective given in Natasha Walter’s November 2006 article for *The Guardian*. Walter, N. “We are just watching things get worse”. *The Guardian*. 28 November 2006. www.guardian.co.uk, accessed 12 December 2006.

2. Methodology

- A sample of 42 interviews was conducted with members of the *Wolesi Jirga* as primary data for the study. The sample comprised of 27 women and 15 men (see Figure 1 for a breakdown of the MPs interviewed by gender and province). Views put across in the paper are not intended to suggest quantitative trends—rather, they are the accurately documented and analysed statements of respondents.
- Members of Parliament were selected according to their gender, ethnicity, constituency, political affiliations, and whether they could speak English or not (aiming for a mixture of English-speaking and non-English speaking respondents), with the intention of interviewing as broad a range of viewpoints as possible.
- All interviews were conducted individually, and consent forms were presented in Dari explaining the purpose of the study and guaranteeing anonymity. Each respondent was asked if they would prefer to be referred to as an MP from their province, or more broadly, from their region of Afghanistan.
- It is acknowledged that the presence of the (British) researcher may have affected answers given. This may have limited responses made, due to a respondent's uncertainty concerning the study or a suspicion of international activities in Afghanistan in general. More frequently however it appeared that the respondents were comfortable speaking to an outsider. Further, at times it led to respondents explaining statements in detail on the assumption that the researcher was unfamiliar with the socio-political context of Afghanistan.
- A choice of Dari, Pashtu or English as an interviewing language was given to all interviewees, although the mother-tongue of both interpreters was Dari. The researcher's own knowledge of Dari was also drawn upon.
- The quality of translation was extremely high. It is, however, acknowledged that in any interpretation a small part of the original meaning will be lost. This limitation was controlled for by checking all interview transcripts with the interpreters.
- Interviews were also conducted with representatives of international agencies involved in providing assistance to parliament. Respondents were both international and national representatives of their organisations.
- Throughout the course of the study it became apparent that interviews with members of the secretariat, *Meshrano Jirga*, civil society organisations and governmental ministries would have also been useful. These interviews could constitute the basis of future research.

3. Background: Women's Political Participation in Afghanistan, 1964-2005¹⁶

Contrary to popular assumption, the presence of women in political establishments is not an entirely new or internationally-introduced phenomenon in Afghanistan. The third Afghan Constitution, drafted under King Zahir Shah in 1964, gave women the right to vote and to enter parliament as elected candidates for the first time. These reforms, however, were not widely welcomed in the country as a whole and were met with considerable opposition from religious fundamentalists.¹⁷ Still, as a result of the reforms, in elections the following year three women were elected as members of parliament, and two were appointed as members of the upper house, or senate. In the simultaneous establishment of the cabinet, Kubra Nurzai was appointed Minister of Public Health, and was re-appointed in 1967, and Shafiqah Ziyai became Minister without Portfolio in 1969, and was assigned the same post in 1971. The year 1965 also saw the establishment of both the socialist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), with its generally progressive agenda for women's rights, and the Democratic Organisation of Afghan Women. Women's participation in political institutions continued from this point until the early 1990s, although their involvement as activists in the PDPA regime was highly contested. While women's subsequent relationship with political participation has been turbulent, to say the least, their potential contribution to national-

level politics has been recognised at different points over the last 45 years.

Having said this, taking into account the comprehensive suppression of women during the *mujahiddin* and *Taliban* eras, it is necessary to consider the presence of women in parliament now in its gendered political context. The effects of the exclusion of women from political space during these times are still apparent. However, considerable efforts have been made to redress the inequalities imposed. Following the Bonn Agreement (December 2001), and subsequent conferences such as the Beijing +10,¹⁸ the Government of Afghanistan (GoA), with the encouragement of the international community, made a series of commitments to Afghan women, including the signing of the Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 2003, the establishment in 2002 of the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MOWA) and the constitutional introduction in January 2004 of reserved seats for female candidates in legislative elections.¹⁹ The results of these elections the following year were somewhat surprising (almost 30 percent of women won their seats in their own right, and not as a result of the reserved seats²⁰). In total, 68 women were elected as parliamentarians, constituting 27 percent of the 248-member *Wolesi Jirga*, coinciding with the number of seats reserved for them.

¹⁶ Background information taken from: Kandiyoti, D., 2005. *The Politics of Gender and Reconstruction in Afghanistan*. UNRISD Special Events Paper 4, p 31. Geneva: UNRISD, www.unrisd.org, accessed 27 December 2005. Also: Educational Broadcasting Corporation, 2006. "Wide Angle: Flying down to Kabul. Handbook: Women in Afghanistan: Politics." PBS. www.pbs.org, accessed 7 March 2007.

¹⁷ With thanks to an anonymous reviewer for contributing to this point.

¹⁸ This 2005 conference was attended by an official delegation from Afghanistan, led by the then Minister of Women's Affairs Masooda Jalal, and pre-empted the drafting of the National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA). UNAMA 2005. "Gender Issues", Issue 1, March 2005. UNAMA: Kabul, www.unama-afg.org, accessed February 10, 2007.

¹⁹ Norris, op. cit., 7.

²⁰ Wilder, op. cit., 1.



Even factors such as seating arrangements have come to significantly alter gender relations and the decision-making environment in parliament.

4. Women's Participation: The Current Context

This section discusses the current situation in parliament and the changes that have occurred over its first year. First, the politics of presence is discussed in regard to three areas: women in parliament, men's perceptions of women in parliament, and misconceptions of the reserved seat system. Second, women's motivations for coming to parliament are discussed in relation to the representation of women's gender interests.

4.1 The politics of presence: Women in parliament

What, then have been the effects of women's presence in parliament? Has their presence contributed to the way in which the legislature functions, or the ways in which decisions are made? According to many MPs, even factors such as seating arrangements have come to significantly alter gender relations and the decision-making environment in parliament over the course of a year (see Box 2). Women have been able to prove the worth of their participation with their generally high levels of education and commitment to tasks.

Having said this, whether women are affecting or contributing to processes of decision-making as a direct result of their presence in parliament needs further exploration. Many of the female MPs interviewed considered their critical mass a potentially key factor, suggesting that, should all women vote as a block, they would have enough votes (27 percent) to significantly alter the outcome of decisions taken. In the words of one MP, representative of the majority of respondents:

*"there are 68 women but they are not united, they all have different ideas. If we came together as one group we would be able to affect the decisions that are made, but now we can't do this."*²¹

Due to the divisions between women, even if they were in the majority there is no guarantee that they would vote collectively, in spite of a common assumption that women hold common interests by virtue of their gender. However, it was often stated by women that "men make the final decisions anyway because they are in the majority,"²² implying a collective stance among men. Such a statement denotes not only a perception of relative powerlessness against a majority block, but also a perceived opposition between men and women. Thus, regardless of whether women do share interests on the basis of their gender, there is a general assumption that they ought to share these interests. There may well be differences between women, and between men, but essentially a strong gender divide between the interests of women and men is perceived, and this divide is seen (by some women at least) to determine men's final authority in parliament.²³

In addition, the fact that women are present in high numbers in parliament has been used as a rubber-stamp, confirming *outwardly* a commitment to increasing their political participation. A number of female MPs were of the opinion that this constitutes an excuse for some men to disregard further issues concerning women's rights. As one described:

²¹ Interview, female MP, Kandahar.

²² Interview, female MP, western Afghanistan.

²³ With thanks to an anonymous reviewer for their comments on this issue.

*"[t]here are no rights for women. When we discuss women's rights in parliament, the men say that we already have rights because there are a lot of women in parliament."*²⁴

This is supported by the statements of numerous male MPs, one of whom asserted that:

*"There are 28 percent of seats for women in the Wolesi Jirga, and this assures us that they have their rights."*²⁵

If women's parliamentary presence is being used to block the furthering of a gender rights agenda on the grounds that one has already been fulfilled, their presence could be seen as indirectly detrimental to the furthering of their gender interests.

4.2 The politics of presence: Men's perspectives on the reserved seats and women's participation

Strong gender divides may be in place, and as a result men may appear to some female MPs as a collective and opposing force, but that is not to say that male MPs do form a homogenous group in opposition on every issue under discussion. As illustrated in Box 2, men are often supportive of their female colleagues. Nevertheless, there is still a certain amount of resentment regarding the reserved seats. One MP, echoing the concerns of many male parliamentarians, described the system in terms of a breach of men's democratic rights during the elections:

*"If we see it from a democratic point of view, then 68 seats are not enough, because [women] should have had 100 seats reserved. On the other side... some men received 6,000-8,000 votes and they could not come to parliament, but a woman could win a seat with 1,000 votes. Is this justice, or democracy? No."*²⁶

The reserved seats system is critiqued here for encouraging undemocratic principles. Affirmative action is not in itself necessarily undemocratic, particularly if seen as a temporary measure. However, while it is acknowledged by many male MPs that reserved seats for women were needed, the fact that significant numbers of men were not successful as a direct result of affirmative action is a point of contention. The discrepancy between male and female vote counts was in many cases extremely large, which often leads to women's presence in general being considered unmerited.²⁷ One male MP described the way in which men make "jokes" with women, telling them that they are only in parliament as a result of the reserved seats.²⁸

These attitudes are not representative of all male perspectives and there are many men who see the affirmative action taken as a means to compensate for past gender inequalities (see Section 1.2). One male MP from Baghlan described the need for reserved seats until a better standard of living has been achieved for women. This commitment to gender equality, however, is widely qualified by the concern to "take things slowly," and to ensure that opposing opinions are not incited. MPs from

²⁴ Interview, female MP, Kuchi.

²⁵ Interview, male MP, Balkh (emphasis added).

²⁶ Interview, male MP, Herat.

²⁷ Women were able to win seats with only a few votes as a result of the specific system of reserving seats. In every province on average at least two seats were reserved for them regardless of the amount of votes received. However, only one WJ candidate was elected to office with fewer than 1000 votes - a female candidate for Uruzgan province. Wilder, op. cit, 13-14.

²⁸ Interview, male MP, Badakshan.

Ghazni and Bamiyan noted the strategic reasons for erring on the side of caution:

*"When a country has a history of marginalising women then we have to work at this in a calculated way. Then we will cover more ground in a shorter time. We should not have a knee-jerk reaction."*²⁹

*"If a sick person needs 5mg of vitamins, and you give him 500mg, he will die. Our society is the same; we need to introduce things slowly."*³⁰

Other male MPs also referred to historical events to justify the rationale behind moving forward slowly. One described the violent reactions to the progressive decrees of Amanullah Khan, one of which was the rendering of veiling non-compulsory.³¹ In order, then, to make serious progress in the furthering of women's rights, the general consensus of male MPs is to proceed carefully. This provokes the

question of whether the stance of even those male MPs who are highly receptive to the presence and contributions of their female counterparts is likely to shift, perhaps wisely, when more controversial and potentially contentious issues are discussed.

4.3 The politics of presence: Reservation misconceived?

The majority of women interviewed appreciated reserved seats as means to combat institutionalised inequality. As one explained, expressing a commonly voiced opinion, affirmative action of this sort signifies a stark contrast to the exclusion of women from public office under the Taliban:

"During the Taliban times women had a very bad situation. All the government was male-dominated. The reserved seats are a good thing for us now... If they didn't

Box 2. Perspectives of women's parliamentary presence, one year on

"In parliament we don't sit in party groups, we sit alphabetically, with some women sitting next to men. At first, the mujahiddin wakils and the mullahs didn't like this at all. But the 68 women in parliament are all educated and they have impressed these men, the men think, 'wow, women can give good ideas, and they study hard.' This, in my opinion, is a very positive, big change in some commanders who previously didn't want to talk with any women outside their own families" (interview, female MP, Paktika).

"From my province two male wakils can only write their name... They are now able to sit and talk with women, and because of their position in parliament they are not able to be violent towards the people anymore. One MP was a maulawi before—he didn't like women at all, but now he is happy to sit and talk with them" (interview, female MP, Faryab).

"Women being in parliament is very necessary and useful, they give good points in building legislation and strategy. Even some men have not given their views yet and some say irrelevant things. There are some women who know the law and so it is very good to have them in parliament" (interview, male MP, Logar).

"Women in parliament have been participating well, they have been a key factor. We were thinking before that they might not be educated, but actually they have good ideas on certain subjects and sometimes better than some men" (interview, male MP, Bamiyan).

²⁹ Interview, male MP, Ghazni.

³⁰ Interview, male MP, Bamiyan.

³¹ Interview, male MP, Bamiyan. Also Kandiyoti, D., 2005, op. cit.

*reserve seats then maybe in some provinces no-one would vote for women.*³²

However, a smaller number of women voiced grave concerns about the system of reserved seats undermining the legitimacy of their parliamentary presence in men's perceptions, as discussed above. Further, several women strongly expressed the opinion that the reserved seats were considered a guarantee of electoral success, and as such considerably weaken the incentive to generate sustainable constituency support. The reliance on reserved seats thus detracts from the need to secure a consistent support network upon which to base successive electoral campaigns. Another opinion expressed was that the reserved seats were needed in the 2005 elections, and will continue to be necessary until public acknowledgement of women's political capability increases. This acknowledgment was considered imminent, and thus the reservations merely a temporary measure. Indeed, it is the contention of this paper that the reserved seats system should be a temporary one, in order that it remains a compensatory measure to address past inequalities, and not a means through which to provide women with an unfair advantage.

However, significant numbers of MPs hold misconceptions about the way in which the system was intended to function. According to Article 83 of the Constitution,³³ *at least* 68 seats are reserved for women (on average two for every province), and the others remain

general, to be won by candidates with high enough votes of either sex. Although the Constitution is clear on this issue, there is an overwhelmingly widespread assumption among men and women that these general seats were de facto the preserve of men.³⁴ The following statements are typical of many MPs' perspectives:

*"In Balkh there are only three seats for women and eight seats for men."*³⁵

*"In Nangarhar there are 14 seats and 10 of these seats are for men, four of them are for women."*³⁶

*"I believe that seats should not be reserved. They should not have an exact number for women, and I hope that in the next parliament there are more women, this is their right."*³⁷

In this way, general seats—supposedly open for any candidate to contest—have become men's seats in public perceptions, primarily as a result of a distinct lack of detailed information about election procedures at the time of the polls. This is emphasised in the way in which the majority of women and some men MPs stated in interviews that having *only* 68 women's seats was "not enough." The danger here is that the minimum number of 68 seats has become a maximum "glass ceiling," potentially preventing women from attaining more seats in the future.

³² Interview, female MP, Wardak.

³³ *The Constitution of Afghanistan* (Unofficial Translation) in AREU, 2006. *The A to Z Guide to Afghanistan Assistance*. Fifth Edition, Kabul, 95.

³⁴ The phenomenon of general seats becoming "men's seats" in the public imaginary has been noted as occurring in India also at the local level. Smith, *op. cit.*, 181.

³⁵ Interview, female MP, Balkh.

³⁶ Interview, female MP, Nangarhar.

³⁷ Interview, male MP, Logar.



Women's motivations for coming to parliament included the desire to alter a perceived inequity in family dynamics.

4.4 The presence of politics: Motivations and obstacles

In all 27 interviews conducted with female MPs, women's gender issues of some description were mentioned as motivations for coming to parliament. One MP from Panjshir articulated her own motivations as highly strategic concerns for women:

"Women are only wives, mothers, sisters and daughters, they have these four faces in Afghanistan. When you are a daughter there are rules set for you and threats from your family. When you become a wife there are rules set for you by your in-laws. When you are a mother there are rules set for you by your sons. When I saw these things I wanted to do something about it."³⁸

This demonstrates a drive to alter the inherent inequity in family dynamics, and change the ways in which women's subordination is often standard domestic practice. Other women talked about "bringing women's voices" to parliament—although, without explaining exactly how they go about collecting "women's voices," an inherent assumption was made by these women that they were already aware of the concerns of their constituents. Further motivations given included acting as role models to demonstrate women's ability to work at high levels with men, and altering women's position as "under the threat of men."³⁹ However, these strategic interests, although mentioned, were not accompanied by suggestions for how they might be adapted into legislation. They remain interests, lacking strategy. Reasons for this might include a lack of capacity, or lack of mechanisms through

³⁸ Interview, female MP, Panjshir.

³⁹ Interviews, female MPs, Logar, Ghor, Ghazni, Bamiyan, Balkh.

which to convert these interests into legislative format. Another could be the notable lack of knowledge about and harmonisation of different existing sources of legislation and treaty obligations of the government concerning women's rights. Also, in the absence of any suggestions as to how these ideas might be put into practice, a lack of motivation for the *substantive* representation of women's gender interests was observed.

Women's practical gender interests are also considered highly important, with many female MPs mentioning women's healthcare, education and employment as key concerns. It was acknowledged by most that their legislative role did not involve the provision of facilities to respond to these concerns, but instead the representation of corresponding interests in parliament. Despite this, female MPs have in many cases taken on roles of direct service provision to attend to the practical *needs* of their constituents. One MP, representative of many respondents, described the ways in which she had assisted the widows in her village:

*"[In my village] there are lots of widows and they don't have any breadwinners, so they come to me and they ask me to give them food, to help them directly. My husband bought tea and sugar and he said that when widows come to our house we should give them these things. I also got 150 blankets from an NGO and I took them to a village."*⁴⁰

This demonstrates the expectations of constituents concerning MPs' role as service providers. As a consequence of these expectations, the value placed by MPs on direct service provision

is significant, and there is a need to be *seen* to be addressing practical needs in spite of the knowledge that this is not their formal role.

Finally, many women's motivations for coming to parliament involved the representation of group-specific interests. One woman from Wardak, again echoing the concerns of a number of MPs, identified the needs of Hazara women from her province as those she intended to represent:

*"When I nominated myself it was my goal to make a good situation for Hazara women in Wardak. During our history we have had a very bad situation and this is my chance to help them go to school and come into a political environment. This was my most important goal in becoming an MP."*⁴¹

Voicing concern for the interests of a minority group of which she is a part on regional, ethnic and gender levels, the respondent makes clear that her key motivations in coming to parliament were to represent the interests of this group, as opposed to those of women in general. This highlights the fact that multiple identities, determining numerous and often competing interests, are present. This is not specific to MPs, of course, but it can be seen that the prioritisation of competing identities can determine motivation for action. This is also the case for one MP who identified herself by gender before ethnicity:

*"I am a Pashtun, but I am a woman before I am a Pashtun. But some women think I am a Pashtun before I am a woman."*⁴²

⁴⁰ Interview, female MP, northern Afghanistan.

⁴¹ Interview, female MP, Wardak.

⁴² Interview, female MP, Kabul. A factor determining the aspect of identity people are willing to prioritise or defend is the social significance or background attached to it. For example, while Pashtuns have not been systematically persecuted in Afghanistan, women have, and so the speaker is perhaps more likely to defend her stance as a woman than a Pashtun. On the other hand, Hazara women, who have been persecuted on account of their gender *and* ethnicity, may be equally as likely to defend either aspect of their identity.

Indeed, holding concerns for women's gender interests, and prioritising these above other kinds of "identity" interests, are markedly different stances. Women's ethnic, regional, linguistic, personal or political identities are in many cases considered of greater significance

than their gender (see Section 5.3). As such, the presence of (other) identity politics may constitute a barrier to the furthering of gender interests, which remain as yet unrepresented as platforms for action in parliament.



During the first year in parliament 18 commissions were formed to correspond with and monitor the executive ministries. At the time of writing, three of the 18 commission leaders are women.

5. Parliamentary Affiliations: The Articulation of Collective Interests

For minority groups, block-forming, allegiance-building, or even fully-fledged party institutionalisation is often important to the effective representation of interests.⁴³ Individual personalities and their patronage-based networks and associations in Afghan politics have for decades held substantial political power, and there has been a marked lack of ideology or issues-based blocks transcending this trend. One exception to this general rule has been the significance of Islamic ideology-based networks, comprised of *madrassa*, *ulama* and religious movements, whose legacy remains and whose influence in the political sphere is considerable. Nevertheless, these networks have been notoriously factionalised, have operated on patronage-based terms, and have not held consistent or consolidated platforms for social action. This example blurs the distinction between the politics of ideology and that of patronage, and makes clear the fact that these categories overlap.

Given that in general there have been very few social platforms in Afghanistan through which political pressure has been exerted, it may seem incongruous to suggest that issues-based blocks are key to the substantive representation of women's gender interests. Yet, as will be explored in section 5.1, the patronage-based means through which individuals exert influence in parliament are not conducive to the representation of collective interests. It is argued that group over individual representation of women's gender interests is essentially more effective, but that group formation and

consolidation, with its history of dysfunction in Afghanistan, will be difficult to achieve in this context.

Ideas-based groups are likely to be more strongly and effectively united than groups formed according to ethnic or other kinds of identity. Groups based on ideas that transcend ethnic, regional, linguistic, gender, and other social barriers are more likely to be conducive to broad-based lobbying, and also long-lasting campaigns, than those whose membership is based on a specific identity group.

This section examines these arguments in the context of Afghanistan's *Wolesi Jirga*. Three key areas are explored: leadership issues, personality politics and patronage, "outside" influence and the concept of a "politics of ideas."

5.1 Leadership issues: Personality politics, patronage, reputation

The struggle for leadership is a significant obstacle to alliance-building, in terms of the formation of parliamentary groups, new parties, caucuses and commissions. One MP from Parwan province described having a following of 36 MPs, but he wanted to form two small parliamentary groups rather than one united one. This would apparently allow for more leadership positions and consequently convince more "friends" to join.⁴⁴ As such, political capital is created by the creation and

⁴³ Goetz, A. M., 2002. "No shortcuts to power: constraints on women's political effectiveness in Uganda." *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 40(4): 549-575.

⁴⁴ Interview, male MP, Parwan. At the time of interview the minimum number of MPs needed to form a parliamentary group was 21, according to Rule 12 of the "Rules of Procedure of the Wolesi Jirga (Provisional)", ICG, op. cit., 12.

distribution of positions of public office, rather than by demonstrating an ability to achieve political goals. Another MP commented that the presence of two prominent and conflicting personalities within a group was the reason she did not want to become a member.⁴⁵ As one commentator noted in the interview, “[e]verything in parliament is about leadership, nothing else matters... leadership, and the battle for it, is key.”⁴⁶

The decision to join newly-forming groups is largely based on who its members are, rather than the platforms it holds. This is not entirely surprising given that, as discussed above, political activity in Afghanistan has been largely dominated by personality-based affiliations. This is emphasised in answers given to questions regarding the internationally-instigated Women’s Caucus. Those women who had not heard of the group, rather than highlighting their unfamiliarity with its policy agenda and platforms, were instead concerned about its predominant personalities:

“[T]his is the first time that I have heard of [the Women’s Caucus], I do not know who is involved in it and before I joined I would want to make sure that it is independent.”⁴⁷

“I have not heard of [the women’s caucus], I do not know which women are members.”⁴⁸

Although the women cited here may hold concerns for the furthering of their gender interests, their primary concern is not what might be achieved for this cause in the Caucus, but *who* would be achieving it. In itself this is indicative of women’s involvement in patronage politics. This was also illustrated by respondents’ comments concerning the operations of the all-female commission for Women’s Affairs, Civil Society and Human Rights. Evidently the personalities involved in a group will affect the agenda of that group—thus, the “who” cannot be wholly separated from the “what.” However, when considering women’s initial motivations to join groups such as the Caucus, the fact that personalities hold more weight than platforms is highly significant in assessing parliamentarians’ priorities.

It cannot be assumed that dominant female personalities in parliament will necessarily represent women’s gender interests. The prominent leadership position of the second deputy speaker was held in the first year by a woman who incurred the resentment of many. This statement is typical of the views of women interviewed:

“Unfortunately [she] does not support us, she considers her own pocket. Now we have a [Women Parliamentarians’] Resource Centre⁴⁹ which is very nice but [she] said ‘I did this for you, I convinced UNIFEM to give it to you’, so some

⁴⁵ Interview, female MP, western Afghanistan.

⁴⁶ Interview, Senior Analyst, international agency.

⁴⁷ Interview, female MP, Balkh (emphasis added).

⁴⁸ Interview, female MP Panjshir (emphasis added).

⁴⁹ The Women Parliamentarians’ Resource Centre was established by UNIFEM in August 2006. Its official name is currently under review, given that it is also intended for the use of female members of the Provincial Councils and members of civil society.

*women refuse to use it because they do not like [her] and they think she has done a bad job this year.... People are not using the centre because they are afraid that it will give her some credit.*⁵⁰

Such *perceived* characteristics highlight the discrepancy between the influence exerted by individual leaders, and that of the groups they supposedly represent.⁵¹ Further, this statement emphasises the patronage-based and zero-sum nature of Afghan politics, where one person's gain is another's loss. Rather than prioritising the furthering of a gender agenda, it was considered that this figure was indeed "more interested in producing rapid results that bolster[ed] [her] ability to extend patronage."⁵² In a patronage-based system, this kind of prioritisation may well be expected, as ignoring the potential benefits of patronage affiliations (and promoting an issue that is not widely considered important) could result

in political "failure." However, the negative aspects of the "bolstering" of personal patronage in this case have not been forgotten by many female MPs. One way in which it was claimed that this figure was able to engineer increased influence, was by appropriating various responsibilities otherwise belonging to an entire commission. This evidently incited resentment and distrust among commission members.⁵³ There is a distinct weakness in an institutional system which allows such appropriation of responsibility and encourages the furthering of personal concerns. A complex web of patronage networks exists within (and outside of) parliament, and without consolidated party foundations, the rules of the game are very much determined by the strongest players. As a result of the need to maintain support through patronage, prominent individuals are likely to prioritise the interests of those directly endorsing them, as opposed to collective (and as such gender) interests.

Box 3. Parliamentary Structure

Parliamentary leadership is divided into five principal roles: speaker, first deputy speaker and second deputy speaker, secretary and assistant secretary. During the first year in parliament 18 commissions were formed in order to correspond with and monitor the executive ministries. With the exception of five commissions to which members of only one sex were elected (commissions for Women's Affairs, Civil Society and Human Rights; Defence; Counter-Narcotics, Alcohol and Immorality; Complaints and Petitions; and Internal Affairs), commissions are made up of both male and female MPs (ICG, op. cit., 14). At the time of writing, three of the 18 commission leaders are women. Aside from the commissions, parliamentary groups are in the process of being formed within parliament, with four having been formed (but only one officially registered) to date. Parliamentary groups are intended to form the bases of political parties within parliament and are thus intended as issues-based affiliations. In order to register, groups must comprise at least 23 members (those that have formed but remain unregistered do not have the required amount of members as yet). One woman is currently the leader of a parliamentary group (as yet unregistered), and according to MPs' own perspectives there are not any formal barriers preventing women taking leadership roles within these groups.

⁵⁰ Interview, female MP.

⁵¹ Smith, op. cit., 38.

⁵² Kandiyoti, D., 2007. "Political fiction meets gender myth: post-conflict reconstruction, 'democratization' and women's rights." In Cornwall, A., Harrison, E., and Whitehead, A. (eds.). *Feminisms in Development: Contradictions, Contestations and Challenges*. Zed Books: London and New York, 194.

⁵³ Interview, female MP, western Afghanistan.

An additional barrier to the collective representation of women's gender interests in parliament is the responsibility put upon and often assumed by prominent women to uphold the reputations of other women MPs. Any "mistakes" made by outspoken women can be used by male MPs to criticise all female parliamentarians, as this statement made by an MP from Nangarhar indicates:

*"When [one female MP] talks about jihadi leaders, men say very bad words to women, sexual words, and we get angry because we are also women. We are offended because we are women too."*⁵⁴

Furthermore, a woman speaking out in parliament may be ostracised by female colleagues if she does not accept this responsibility for their reputations. It is important to note that women's resentment, in this case especially, is directed at the woman in question, and not at the men's sexually abusive comments. This can be linked to the larger societal issue of women bearing the responsibility to maintain family honour, and the way in which those women who undertake potentially controversial public or leadership roles risk being blamed by men and women alike for any slurring of collective reputation. The politics of personality played out among women and the divisions created by leadership "responsibilities" are thus preventing the substantive representation of their gender interests.

5.2 Outside influence: Parties and the restriction of political autonomy

While institutionalised political parties⁵⁵ do not formally exist in Afghanistan, the word "party" is generally associated with the predominantly ethnic-based and former *mujahiddin* factions, such as *Jamiat-I Islami* and *Wahdat*, which have wielded significant influence (albeit in shifting "coalitions") and which now function as political parties of sorts. These so-called parties still influence parliamentary activities, in spite of the attempt to limit this influence through the adoption of the Single Non-Transferable Vote (SNTV) voting system. This is clear from the sheer number of MPs who are known (or rumoured) to have connections with these groups.⁵⁶ However, the relationship between the parties and their (male and female) "representatives" in the WJ is not straightforward. Respondents often referred to these parties as outside parties: separate entities from the workings of parliament. Many MPs, in spite of being known as a member of a certain outside party such as *Jamiat* or *Wahdat*, are free to make their own, alternative allegiances or coalitions within parliament while still being in contact with the outside party on a regular basis.⁵⁷ They do not always represent the views of the outside party, and this is largely due to the fact that few of these outside parties have consolidated party platforms.

⁵⁴ Interview, female MP, Nangarhar.

⁵⁵ An "Institutionalised political party" here denotes "a party that has a fairly detailed organisational network and in which decisions in the party follow, at least in a formal sense, the procedures set down in its statutes". Randall, V., and Sråsand, L., 1999. *Party Institutionalization and the New Democracies*, paper for the ECPR Joint Session of Workshops, Mannheim, March 1999, www.essex.ac.uk, accessed 6 August, 2006.

⁵⁶ For an outline of principal parties and their parliamentary support bases see Wilder, op. cit.

⁵⁷ Interview, male MP, Bamiyan.

Having said this, many MPs stated in interviews that the primary reason for legislative stasis in decision-making was an informal but widespread outside-party influence over parliamentarians. Previous research has highlighted the phenomenon of outside parties supporting women financially in their campaigns,⁵⁸ for various reasons, one of which to draw on the reserved seats system to potentially strengthen outside-party influence within parliament. Indeed, a number of women worked for these parties, albeit informally, during the *mujahiddin* and Russian eras, and were selected as party representatives as a result of this prior connection. It appears that, in the words of one female MP from Paktika, this outside-party influence is still strong:

*"It is impossible for women to [stand together], as women are not independent, they are supported by [outside] parties and they have to say what the parties want them to say."*⁵⁹

On the other hand, many women are able to manipulate their outside party connections strategically. The story of a woman MP from Balkh illustrates the way in which this is happening. Although given money by a party during the elections to finance her campaign, she has apparently no intention of officially joining the party in spite of being asked many times. If she is asked to repay the money, she claims she will reimburse the party out of her salary. She therefore considers the outside party to have little remaining influence over

the interests she is able to represent in parliament. While this fluidity and informality allows MPs, and particularly women, some space in which to manoeuvre, and potentially access advantageous connections or patronage networks, the lack of institutionalised "rules of the game" can be counterproductive in terms of representing women's gender interests.⁶⁰

A second source of outside influence affecting women's allegiance-building inside parliament is that of individual men, such as local commanders, or relatives. The significance of their influence is made clear in the following statement, and is widely reflected in interviews with both men and women MPs:

*"In parliament most women cannot make decisions by themselves, mostly their husbands and fathers tell them how to vote. If husbands tell their wives who to vote for then they will follow this".*⁶¹

This restriction of political autonomy has significant repercussions on the formation of issues-based groups, as women directly connected to these men are not necessarily able to choose where and with whom to form their allegiances. Gender issues are commonly perceived as "soft" and do not constitute a priority for the affluent and powerful—thus raising these issues may not coincide with the general perception of how to be influential, or "successful" in parliament. Even if women themselves *want* to be involved in groups supporting women's gender interests, they may

⁵⁸ Wordsworth, A., 2006. "The politics of patronage: an exploration of women's acquisition of power in Afghanistan. Case study: legislative elections in Balkh province, 2005." Unpublished masters thesis, 22.

⁵⁹ Interview, female MP, Paktika.

⁶⁰ Goetz, 2002, op. cit.

⁶¹ Interview, female MP, central Afghanistan.

not be able or willing to support these groups actively. This evidence contributes to a widely held stereotype of women MPs in the Afghan parliament being puppets for male relatives or commanders. However, many women MPs talked of resisting the offers of patronage-based support of prominent male figures, including one woman from central Afghanistan:

*“[A prominent male figure] asked me to join him, and he said that if I had any debts he would pay them if I nominated myself for him. I said no, I don’t want your money”.*⁶²

While it is unlikely that the respondent would have talked about accepting money from this figure if she had done so, it is nonetheless interesting that a discourse of independence is adopted here. Indeed, this discourse was adopted by many of the women MPs interviewed.

Finally, low levels of security in Afghanistan are limiting women’s political autonomy, the interests they are able to articulate being directly restricted by the potential risks incurred. This has been apparent in women’s necessarily covert support of a particularly outspoken MP. According to the MP herself, female colleagues have often approached her in parliament, and when shaking hands, have passed notes explaining their support for her ideas. They will not, however, express this support openly.⁶³ In public, at least, this MP is isolated in her campaigns, primarily as a result of the security risks she undertakes. Although women in many cases agree with her ideas, they are (understandably) unwilling to

put their own lives and those of their families at risk in actively condoning her controversial agenda. Security factors are thus directly affecting what women can and cannot support in parliament, further limiting their autonomy.

5.3 Obstacles to a politics of ideas: SNTV, ethnicity and the mantra of national unity

In the Afghan parliament, women have come together in support of a few key ideas, including the age of majority. Most women and some men were strongly allied in opposition to the suggestion that girls should be considered adults at some point between the ages of 9-14⁶⁴ (the age for boys is 18). After concerted effort, the age for girls was raised to 17, a significant improvement. This is a clear and encouraging example of potential collective support of women’s gender interests in parliament. Having said this, in general little attention has been paid within parliament to the political platforms on which alliances are to stand, as a result of the fact that it is the alliances themselves which are considered important. This is fundamental to determining why women’s gender interests are not substantively represented. Very few MPs who had already joined, or were in the process of forming parliamentary groups could identify the policies on which their group had come together. This may have been due to the fact that many groups have not yet registered, and MPs are thus reluctant to give details of as yet unconfirmed policy stances. However, there are two further explanations.

⁶² Interview, female MP, central Afghanistan.

⁶³ Interview, female MP, Farah.

⁶⁴ Reports vary as to the age apparently suggested for girls’ majority.

The first of these is the legacy of the SNTV voting system. Prior to and following the 2005 elections various commentators openly criticised Karzai's choice of this system. They argued that the ostensible discouragement of party formation—in line with the President's (and public's) own aversion to parties—would only serve to strengthen patronage networks, increase the advantages of established groups and render the subsequent internal functioning of parliament positively chaotic.⁶⁵ This research confirms these hypotheses. Given that group platforms were not required, and candidates register as individuals as opposed to party members (although they can indicate party affiliation if they choose), there is no foundation on which to form issues-based blocks, or to build a politics of ideas. As a number of MPs described, this has had debilitating consequences in parliamentary sessions, with 248 voices competing for plenary audition:

*"[One] issue regarding inefficiency and the slow pace of working inside parliament is the structure of parliament. Our parliament is not the same as other parliaments in other countries as they are formed from different parties. We have 248 seats in our parliament and these are representing 248 different parties."*⁶⁶

This has serious repercussions for those interested in representing women's gender interests, which by nature are collective and

indicate a shared concern for the need to reassess structures of subordination that affect a large group of people.

The second explanation relates to the restrictions put in place by the *Wolesi Jirga's* Rules of Procedure which prohibit parliamentary groups from forming along ethnic, linguistic, religious or regional lines.⁶⁷ Consequently, groups are forming with these restrictions of uppermost concern rather than with ideological foundations to unify members being a priority (or even a concern). Several MPs reported that group leaders were recruiting set numbers of people of different ethnicities for their groups without even mentioning potential platforms. A politics of ideas is notably absent. As such, groups do not provide an environment conducive to the effective representation of either women's strategic or practical gender interests.

Affecting the formation of groups and their composition is the mantra of "national unity,"⁶⁸ which many MPs reported as an underlying motivation for their very presence in parliament. However, it is clear from the accounts of a number of MPs that ethnicity is still significant to the determination of parliamentary alliances. As one respondent described:

"Each Afghan leader believes deeply and strongly in an ethnic consideration. They say they support all Afghans but they will always support a member of their

⁶⁵ Wilder, op. cit.; NDI, op. cit.; Rubin, B., 2005. "Afghanistan: The Wrong Voting System." International Herald Tribune, 16 March 2005. www.ihf.com, accessed 10 July 2006.

⁶⁶ Interview, male MP, southwest Afghanistan. This was also noted by Weinbaum in his 1972 discussion of Afghanistan's "non-party democracy." Weinbaum, M. G., 1972. "Afghanistan: Nonparty Parliamentary Democracy." In *The Journal of Developing Areas*. Vol. 7, No. 1. 57-74.

⁶⁷ Rule 13 of the "Rules of Procedure of the Wolesi Jirga", cited in ICG, op. cit., 12. ICG have critiqued this rule extensively, and predicted the debilitating effect it has had.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 12.

*own ethnic group... For example, some MPs said to me, 'I don't share the same opinion as that person but I cannot speak against them as they are the same ethnicity as me.'*⁶⁹

It appears that any “politics of ideas” is overruled by a politics of ethnic identity and personal interest, in spite of measures (such as the rules determining the makeup of parliamentary groups) to counteract this. Indeed, guidelines designed to encourage “national unity” and the forming of mixed groups are serving to prevent the consolidation of a cross-cutting politics of ideas. It is evident from the data collected in interviews that ethnic identity is stronger than ideology, or gender-based affiliations in parliament. As a result, strong platforms are not developed for the furthering of women’s gender interests.

A significant effect of the emphasis placed on the rhetoric of national unity is that, in spite of its superficiality, it appears to dissuade women

from raising concerns about gender-based inequalities. Raising these issues is often seen as divisive and as undermining national unity.⁷⁰ Indeed, there is considerable and tactical disinclination more generally on the part of female MPs to disturb the relative peace in parliament with anything controversial, for fear of losing support already gained. The following statement is typical of many women MPs’ desire to avoid controversy:

“We should use the mechanism of speaking gently and not against the men so that they get angry with us, this will help to change their minds slowly”.⁷¹

A wise approach, perhaps, given the furore incited on several occasions in response to provocative female speeches. Accordingly, the strategic use of discourses of national unity and the more generally perceived need for parliamentary peacekeeping can in themselves constitute barriers to the representation of women’s collective gender interests.

⁶⁹ Interview, male MP, Kabul.

⁷⁰ With thanks to an anonymous reviewer for highlighting this point.

⁷¹ Interview, female MP, Herat.

6. The Role of Representation: “Constituency” and its Connotations

In the Afghan context constituency is an ambiguous term. Seats for the *Wolesi Jirga* are allocated quantitatively to each province according to population figures,⁷² but many MPs described having mobilised village or district-level networks of support and considered these, over entire provinces, to be their constituencies. Moreover, the representation of “constituents” is affected by two overlapping issues—first, geographical factors, concerned with *where* an MP’s province or district is located; and second, the particular composition of MPs’ networks of support, concerned with *whose interests* are being represented.

6.1 Issues of representation: Geographical factors

All MPs interviewed, regardless of their province’s proximity to Kabul, either rent or own a home in Kabul to allow regular access to parliament. A considerable hindrance to provincial representation is that MPs’ return to their province is often limited by a lack of time, inadequate funds and distance combined with unsuitable roads, and seasonal weather concerns. Many MPs related these kinds of difficulties, the following statement being typical of complaints concerning this issue:

“I do not have good contact with the people [in my province] as the province is very far from Kabul and the roads are bad. I have no office there as there is no budget for wakils to have offices, and only the centre of my province has network coverage for the phones. In the districts there is nothing.”⁷³

The amount of time spent in a province depends on a number of variables as outlined above, and is also determined by personal or business interests and MPs’ personal priorities. Despite the numerous restrictions, a heavy reliance is placed by MPs on direct telephone contact with constituents,⁷⁴ limiting the communication of public interests to those areas with mobile network coverage.⁷⁵ Constituents play a role in overcoming the communication difficulties faced by MPs by themselves travelling to Kabul to consult them.

Many MPs’ parliamentary priorities lie with district, or even village as opposed to provincial-level interests. Indeed, several MPs interviewed acquired their seats through the mobilisation of district or village-wide blocks agreeing to vote consensually.⁷⁶ In doing this, MPs may prioritise the interests of these districts over and above the interests of the province as a whole. Research on the parliamentary elections highlighted the fact that

⁷² Article 83, *Constitution of Afghanistan*, Government of Afghanistan, op. cit.

⁷³ Interview, female MP, central Afghanistan.

⁷⁴ An indication of the reliance on mobile phone contact was given by one MP from Balkh: “One time in parliament someone rang an MP with their problems and the MP put them on speakerphone for the whole parliament to hear.” Interview, male MP, Balkh.

⁷⁵ In many cases this is restricted to provincial centres.

⁷⁶ Interview, male MP, Farah.

women in particular mobilised voter-networks according to their own districts, as a way in which to minimize perceived security risks, reduce reputational slurs that might be incurred from contact with unknown men, and simultaneously maximise vote-gains from *qawm* and ethnic affiliations.⁷⁷ As a result, the “women’s gender interests” represented in parliament by these women may be specific to a very streamlined constituency, as described in section 4.4.

Security is a significant issue regarding MPs’ geographical constituency. One hypothesis of this study was that the extent to which constituent and women’s gender interests were represented in parliament was directly proportional to levels of security in an MP’s province. In other words, the more insecure the province, the more difficult it becomes to make visits there, and the less connection with constituents an MP subsequently has. Furthermore, the less safe the province, the less an MP will be able, or willing, to speak freely about the situation there, and particularly about subjects deemed controversial in any way. Consequently, the less likely women’s gender interests are substantively represented in these areas. This hypothesis received a variety of responses from MPs, some of whom agreed, as the following quotations illustrate:

*“There was a lady from Helmand, and when she talked, the other wakils stopped her because when she talks the Taliban threaten Helmand people”.*⁷⁸

“People from the insecure places say things diplomatically, politically, as

*they do not want to put their lives in danger... In order to be safe I do not say 80 percent of the realities in my province”.*⁷⁹

Security is therefore considered an important factor for both men and women in restricting the articulation of their interests. Some respondents, however, disagreed with the hypothesis. The story told by an MP from Kandahar clearly illustrates this commitment, in spite of men’s attempts to persuade her otherwise:

*“Six men wakils wanted to go to Kandahar for a visit. They wanted to go alone but I insisted that I went with them. We arrived in Kandahar and the men said they wanted to go to the district of Panjwai, where there is a lot of fighting. They told me I could not go with them. So the men took lots of secure vehicles and protection, but I also went there in a normal car to talk to the people. I am not scared because these people are my people.”*⁸⁰

This story also suggests that reasons behind some women MPs not visiting their provinces may include male or family-imposed restrictions, and are not necessarily related to their own fear of provincial insecurity. None of the women interviewed stated that their relatives or other men had actually stopped them going to visit a province, but several mentioned that certain areas were “too dangerous” for women to go to. This demonstrates an internalisation of gendered restrictions on their movement: restrictions somewhat incongruous with the fact that male MPs have been

⁷⁷ Wordsworth, op. cit., 14-17

⁷⁸ Interview, female MP, Panjshir.

⁷⁹ Interview, male MP, southwestern Afghanistan.

⁸⁰ Interview, female MP, Kandahar.

just as much if not more affected to date by increasing insecurity. However, MPs' general willingness or ability to visit and represent the interests of their province appears to depend on their individual family situation, their connections and their perceptions of security levels rather than the location of the province *per se*.

6.2 Issues of representation: Networks of support

The excessive expenses involved in hosting constituents when MPs do visit their own provinces are highly significant in determining the (in)frequency with which they return (see Box 4). To some extent, this minimises contact between MPs and constituents, although liberal hospitality is also extended to constituents visiting MPs in their homes in Kabul.

Having said this, providing hospitality is fundamental to maintaining of networks of support. This "hospitality problem" described

by respondents epitomises the obligations and expense involved in patron-client relationships built or strengthened during the elections.⁸¹ Both male and female MPs are finding in their attempts to meet the high expectations of constituents the difficulty in funding these independently. Associated with hospitality, raised expectation and the phenomenon of patronage, is the more general concept of service provision, or *khedmat*. A universal disappointment was expressed by MPs who had hoped to be able to assist their constituents practically, demonstrating that high expectations concerning their parliamentary role had been held on both sides:

"I do go back [to my province] to meet with the people—I went there in the summer, but I have not been back in these winter holidays as I am ashamed and embarrassed because I haven't managed to do anything for the people."⁸²

Box 4. Hospitality

"When we go back to the provinces our supporters come to meet us and we should be hospitable to them and provide meals for them and parties. It costs so much—how can we do this on such a low salary? We get paid US\$1,000 every month. I went to Badghis for 10 days and I spent US\$1,000-2000 on transport (for the whole family), then each day I had about 100-200 people visiting me so I needed to pay for food and for people to prepare the food. This is difficult especially for women because the men in parliament are mostly rich men anyway. My husband is unemployed so for me I am responsible for the whole family" (interview, female MP, western Afghanistan).

"It is our culture that we should be hospitable to the people. If we do not care about them then they will complain about not having any breakfast, lunch or dinner. They will say 'we voted for you and you cannot even give us breakfast!'" (interview, female MP, northern Afghanistan).

"When people visit us in the province, we spend money to provide food for them, we have to give them money for their transport to us, they expect this as they have to travel 50-60km distance to visit us. They expect their meals. For example this summer when I was in my district people came and I had to slaughter eight sheep to feed them, and I paid for them out of personal expenses" (interview, male MP, Badakshan).

⁸¹ Interestingly, this is not a new phenomenon and has previously been linked to the lack of political parties in Afghanistan, who would otherwise provide the facilities for entertaining guests. Weinbaum, *op. cit.*, 57-74.

⁸² Interview, male MP, southwestern Afghanistan.

Male and female respondents frequently underlined the perceived importance of meeting constituent expectations over the arguably more abstract representation of “interests,” as discussed earlier.

There is a limit to which MPs themselves “connect” with ordinary women and men and this substantively influences their ability to represent their gender interests. One MP explained that for the most part MPs constitute an elite class with few connections to those lower down the social scale, and accordingly cannot empathise with the difficulties of ordinary people.⁸³ This perspective is particularly interesting as its acknowledgement of a social gap diverges from the more typical claim of MPs, and particularly women, to be able to empathise with the problems of the poor. The gap is further widened in that many MPs have only recently returned from abroad, where they have spent the majority of the war years. Women MPs in general claim to be assisting ordinary women, and many are, when they respond to practical needs. However, in reporting these activities

they at times present themselves as benevolent benefactresses,⁸⁴ engaged in charitable tasks for the benefit of poor women and men. In itself this may not be negative, but it serves to strengthen class divides and patronage networks.

Linked to this limited connection between MPs and society in general is the lack of support bases comprised of civil society organisations. Indeed, the absence of a strong women’s movement in the country may well contribute to the hindering of the formation of issues-based alliances in parliament. In Pakistan, as a result of Women’s Action Forum activities, and in Turkey, thanks to the efforts of the Women Jurists’ Association, significant progress has been made in terms of aligning legislation with a gender-sensitive agenda.⁸⁵ The legacy of conflict in Afghanistan, among other factors, has restricted the development of this kind of activity and has led to a distinct lack of broad based legislative support for MPs attempting to promote women’s gender interests.

⁸³ Interview, male MP, Ghazni.

⁸⁴ Interviews, female MPs, central Afghanistan and northwest Afghanistan.

⁸⁵ Basu, A., 2005. *Women, Political Parties and Social Movements in South Asia*. Occasional Paper 5, UNRISD: Geneva. 13-15, www.unrisd.org, accessed 17 March 2007; and Kandiyoti, D., personal communication, June 2007.

7. Executive Indifference and Intervention

Despite the many obstacles discussed above, women's gender interests are being raised to a limited extent in parliament. Considering the major gender imbalances previously enforced in Afghanistan, this is no mean achievement. However, those interests which have been voiced in parliament have, as yet, not greatly influenced legislation.⁸⁶ To some degree, MPs' lack of capacity has contributed towards this. This said, the significant responsibility of the executive in encouraging the realisation of gender-sensitive legislation has been lacking in substance. The following section analyses why this might be the case.

7.1 Executive limitations: Spaces for women in "women's spaces"

One of the principal concerns of female MPs is women's highly contained presence in the executive. Women's executive presence is not only limited, but limited to stereotypically "women's" spaces. Accordingly, there is currently only one female minister—the Minister of Women's Affairs. This minimal and restricted representation is criticised by the majority of female (and some male) MPs interviewed, and is a gender interest on which



Women's gender interests are being raised, to a limited extent, in parliament, but they have yet to influence

⁸⁶ Interview, Programme Officer, international agency.

women are apparently for the most part united. The following quotation, representative of the opinions of many female and male respondents, highlights the way in which this particular gender issue has become a widespread concern:

“In the cabinet there is only one woman minister, and all of us women went to Karzai and we asked him to give us more women in leadership. He promised that if one of the present male ministers failed in his job then he would be replaced by a woman, but he did not keep his promise.”⁸⁷

Karzai’s perceived lack of commitment to women and reported un-kept promises could prove damaging to the confidence of female candidates for ministerial positions, whose actual ability to perform in office might well be equal to or above that of male ministers. Women MPs’ general solidarity on this issue—that there should be more women in executive positions—highlights how although presence alone is seen as inadequate, presence across the leadership of different ministries is considered vital to the changing of opinions concerning women’s capabilities.

The containment of women within MOWA at executive level is considered by many female and male parliamentarians as limiting women’s capacity to bring substantive legislative change in other fields. It is significant that the only female minister is the minister of women’s affairs. Men and women alike expressed their concern about this marginalisation of women in to one ministry. In the words of one interviewee, “we only have one woman minister and she is the Minister for Women’s Affairs—what does this mean?”⁸⁸ The ministry is considered merely symbolic by many, a kind of interna-

tionally-instigated dumping ground for any kind of “women’s issues” (Box 5).

In spite of these concerns, most women MPs interviewed still consider the ministry to be worthwhile and stated that they would support its continued existence in forthcoming debates regarding its future. However, there exists a high level of ambiguity concerning its official role. Is MOWA a service-provider, a policy-maker, a mechanism for advocacy, a tool for the promotion of gender mainstreaming, a mixture of the above or something entirely different? Such ambiguity has led to mixed expectations, and a considerable amount of disappointment as regards the output it has produced in the last five years of its existence. This alleged inactivity is related by some to a perceived lack of funding. One MP asserted in interview that:

“they do not have enough budget to do their work. One year’s budget for MOWA is equal to one day of the budget for defence.”⁸⁹

Box 5. Perspectives on MOWA

“I hate this ministry, because men send us there for everything that happens to us. One ministry cannot solve all of women’s problems” (interview, female MP, Kuchi).

“When the interim government was in place, the international community needed to make a point, a symbolic gesture after the Taliban had left. But there is a debate as to whether the ministry curtails women’s involvement in other ministries” (interview, male MP, Ghazni).

“[MOWA] is a political ministry, to show the world that according to our constitution women have rights” (interview, female MP, Kandahar).

⁸⁷ Interview, female MP, Samangan.

⁸⁸ Interview, female MP, Kabul.

⁸⁹ Interview, female MP, central Afghanistan. In 1385 the Government allocated over \$137 million of the National Core Budget to the Ministry of Defence, and \$3.2 million to MOWA. This is not necessarily reflective of how much was actually spent, but it demonstrates governmental priorities. *1385 National Budget*, Budget Department, Ministry of Finance.

A further approach to MOWA given was that, for the time being, it will suffice, but that there will come a time when it will be replaced with something more effective.

In theory, MOWA is an essential part of Afghanistan's national machinery for women, and a reminder of the government's commitment to women in the Bonn process. In practice, however, there is the danger that the ministry will act instead as a boundary, effectively encasing women's gender concerns in an entity unable to affect the workings of other ministries. Its existence is seen by many female parliamentarians as limiting their capacity to bring substantive legislative change in other fields. Indeed, this coincides with the critical view of state machineries for women in general, which argues that, "[s]tarved of resources and isolated from the arena of politics, these machineries have had little influence on policy-making."⁹⁰ This approach highlights women's marginalisation in political decision-making in spite of their (limited) presence within state institutions.

In addition to the absence of women in the executive, there are no women representatives in the Supreme Court,⁹¹ another issue about which many women MPs are concerned. One woman described that in raising the issue they have come across a certain indifference:

*"In the last meeting that we had with Karzai he agreed with us that there should be one woman in the Supreme Court but so far he has not taken any action towards this. I think he does not believe in women."*⁹²

The lack of concern with which the executive receives women's gender interests that *are* raised, as described by respondents, may well serve as a discouraging factor to those women considering the endorsement of these interests. If efforts to raise these interests are to be dismissed in such a manner, the (lack of) end results might not justify the (often politically perilous) means.

7.2 Executive intervention: Perceptions of corruption

One of the key functions of the Afghan parliament is that of governmental oversight—monitoring its activities, holding it accountable and providing checks and balances against incompetence or illicit activity. According to the majority of parliamentarians interviewed, this function is being rapidly eroded by the government's propensity to offer "benefits" to its supporters (see Box 6).⁹³

Whether these claims are substantiated or not, the *perception* of corruption in itself can affect the functioning of the legislature. Disturbingly, corrupt activities were reported as not being contained within the executive and parliamentary leadership, but also as being used as mechanisms through which to form parliamentary groups. As one MP explained: "three times we tried to make a group but other groups bought our MPs from us!"⁹⁴ Moral concerns aside, this is worrying purely for the structure and future cohesion of the parliamentary groups. Given that ideas-bases and political platforms are generally lacking, as discussed above, there is a likelihood that MPs will be bought out of groups as easily as they are

⁹⁰ Mukhopadhyay, M. and Meer, S., 2004. *Creating voice and carving space: redefining governance from a gender perspective*, Amsterdam: KIT publishers, 13.

⁹¹ The council of the Supreme Court is comprised of nine members who are appointed by the President for 10-year terms. AREU, 2006. *The A-Z Guide to Afghanistan Assistance*. Fifth Edition, Kabul, 73. The members are currently all male.

⁹² Interview, female MP, central Afghanistan.

⁹³ It was reported that the "opposition" is undertaking similarly illicit activities.

⁹⁴ Interview, female MP, northeastern Afghanistan.

bought in. The implications of this on the representation of gender issues are numerous, as the weakening of parliamentary groups inevitably reduces the available and potentially productive forums in which they could be substantively addressed. Furthermore, if it is assumed that the only way to influence governmental decisions is through the paying of bribes, making positive results practically impossible to achieve without correspondingly available funds, the motivation to even try to exert this influence will be insignificant. This could seriously contribute to MPs' unwillingness to challenge the government, on, for example, gender sensitive policy-making.

The World Bank,⁹⁵ among others, has argued that an increase in female members of government institutions contributes to decreasing corruption in those institutions. MPs in Afghanistan's parliament, on the other hand, have not

made any such gendered distinction in discussing corruption in interviews:

*"Corruption is a disease everywhere. If a man or a woman has self-belief, then they will not be corrupt. But it doesn't matter if they are a man or a woman."*⁹⁶

Stories about women accepting money for their rent, trips abroad, and other "benefits" from parliamentary leaders were frequently reported by other women in interviews, implying that contrary to the World Bank's assertions, women in this parliament can be as corrupt if not more so than their male counterparts. Furthermore, they are certainly *perceived* as being equally capable of corruption as their male colleagues. There is thus a considerable problem with the essentialist assumption that women's *inherent characteristics* lead to their not participating in corrupt activities to the same extent as men.⁹⁷

Box 6. Corruption

"We are split into two groups, the opposition and the pro-government. Wakils' support is bought with money by Karzai and the other cabinet ministers. When parliament started the wakils were very active and they wanted to help the people but now they just support the government and show the [red or green] cards that the government wants them to show" (interview, female MP, Kandahar).

"Some MPs say bad things about Qanooni because the government is giving them credit to do this, the government will then pay for their holidays to India. I was going to go to the side of the government because they provide many services for MPs, but my province would not let me do this" (interview, female MP, northeastern Afghanistan).

"The government has used MPs by giving them cash, making them unable to monitor the cabinet, making deals with the parliament" (interview, male MP, Baghlan).

⁹⁵ Interview, Dollar, D., Fisman, R., and Gatti, R., 1999. *Are Women Really the "Fairer" Sex? Corruption and Women in Government*, Policy Research Report on Gender and Development, Working Paper Series, No. 4. The World Bank Development Research Group/Poverty Reduction and Economic Management Network, www.anticorruption-online.org, accessed 4 August 2006.

⁹⁶ Interview, male MP, Kandahar.

⁹⁷ Goetz, A.-M., 2003. *Political Cleaners: How Women are the New Anti-Corruption Force: Does the Evidence Wash?* www.u4.no/document/literature/goetz-2003-gender-corruption.pdf. (no page numbers in original).

8. International Assistance

The international community has played a fundamental role in the establishment of parliament. Training for MPs through workshops, seminars and visits to parliaments overseas, along with projects dedicated to the capacity-building of the secretariat and other ministry staff has been undertaken by a variety of actors, many of whom hold a specific focus on gender. The principal organisations providing assistance to parliament since its inauguration have been UNDP-SEAL (Support to the Establishment of Afghan Legislature), UNIFEM, NDI, and SUNY (USAID), and to a lesser degree IRI, Global Rights and FES. A Working Group comprised of the above agencies, and open to the participation of other organisations, meets once a month to discuss planned activities in parliament. This section looks at how these principal actors perceive their work, and how it is received by parliamentarians.

8.1 Needs and mechanisms: International perspectives

In terms of needs-assessment international agencies are seeking the opinions and feedback of parliamentarians regarding assistance, and structuring programmes accordingly. One representative of an international agency described the way in which they had directly responded to a specific request of female MPs:

“With the issue of women in the Supreme Court WJ members asked us to provide them with Sharia workshops...We coordi-

nated with UNAMA in getting Sharia legal advisors to help lead sessions on women and Sharia, and how they can use Sharia in their defence, as men often use this against them.”⁹⁸

Many women mentioned in interviews that men had used Islamic reasoning “wrongly” to argue against them, and that they wanted to be able to defend their points with a strong religious backing. In this way, a gendered distinction between the needs of men and women was made by women themselves.

Representatives of international organisations also talked about and justified why their programmes had been disaggregated according to gender:

“Women MPs have particular needs—they require special attention. This is the first time that women have been in parliament, and some of them have been threatened. They do not have the political backgrounds, and because of this they lack confidence. We need to design specialised training for them on planning from a gender perspective.”⁹⁹

As such, MPs and internationals consider women to have specific needs in terms of parliamentary training. Endorsing the above statement from an international representative, many women MPs are and consider themselves to be in great need of the confidence-building that parliamentary training may offer. However, it is unfounded to assume

⁹⁸ Interview, Programme Director, international agency.

⁹⁹ Interview, Programme Officer, international agency.

that all 68 female representatives see themselves as having greater needs in these areas than men, and there are certain assumptions made by international agencies concerning MP requirements. For example, to say that all women MPs are lacking in confidence is a major generalisation. In terms of their attitudes to assistance, women are just as prone to *consider* themselves “above” training exercises as their male counterparts.

“I have heard about the workshops, but I have more experience than them. Some of the Afghan teachers at their workshops used to be my students. Some of the foreign teachers are good, but because of their general lack of experience I do not attend their sessions very much.”¹⁰⁰

“I have 16 certificates for completing different trainings. For example, gender is a very basic topic—everyone knows about gender.”¹⁰¹

Moreover, several female MPs suggested that men would be the more ideal beneficiaries of gender training than women. For instance, many programmes have focused on taking groups of women abroad for study trips to other parliaments. However as a woman MP from Nuristan pointed out trips to foreign parliaments would be particularly useful to men, as they would be able to see how women and men MPs interact in other contexts.

Within Afghanistan, male MPs are occasionally invited to trainings on gender, but “men don’t come to the gender sessions because they think they are only for women.”¹⁰² Accordingly, there should be an integrated gender element to all mixed sessions as well as specific workshops on gender. Such a “mainstreaming” approach, therefore, need not involve the replacement of

women-only events, but alongside these could help to increase openness to women’s gender interests being represented in parliament. Furthermore, this approach might encourage men to attend training focussed wholly on gender.

One significant international response to the perceived needs of female MPs is that of the UNDP-UNIFEM Women Parliamentarian’s Resource Centre, as opened in August 2006. The Centre provides a space for women which is suitable for both the hosting of conferences and seminars, and personal study (the centre is equipped with a library and computer room). As such, it constitutes a valuable facility for capacity-building. The Centre is open to all female parliamentarians (and will shortly be available to women members of Provincial Councils and women and also members of civil society groups). Nevertheless, whether women MPs need a space of their own is debatable. Indeed, the centre could become a means to further segregate women and men,¹⁰³ inadvertently condoning the exclusion of women from more general spaces within parliament, such as the parliamentary library. Indeed, this follows the arguments against affirmative action outlined in section 1. Furthermore, as reported in section 5.2, until recently the centre has been in some ways “claimed” by a particular individual in leadership, leaving many women reluctant to use it. It is clear from this and other examples that the assistance from the international community to parliament is seen as a resource to be mobilized by MPs, and competition for the individual capture of these resources is commonplace. Surprisingly, international donors continue to operate as if this were not the case, and thus work on assumptions and expectations that rarely coincide with the politically charged reality of agency-MP relations.

¹⁰⁰ Interview, female MP, Wardak.

¹⁰¹ Interview, female MP, Nangarhar.

¹⁰² Interview, Programme Officer, international agency.

¹⁰³ Whilst men are often invited to attend conferences at the centre, but its being called a “women’s centre” denotes a degree of detachment, indicating that it is intended primarily for female use.

Despite these concerns the Women's Centre has provided a space in which the meetings of the Women's Caucus (see Box 7) are able to take place, and this in itself has been a well-received international enterprise, as discussed below. With the intended broadening of its target user-group, the centre could potentially constitute a forum for the strengthening of legislative-civil society relationships. Additionally, according to one international representative, the Centre has come to meet the needs of international agencies in their efforts to coordinate their programmes with each other:

*"The UNIFEM Centre provided a way for us to work together. It came at the perfect time."*¹⁰⁴

Ironically, in responding to the needs of internationals, the Centre could also potentially benefit MPs, by improving the quality and coordination of the training provided for them.

Further mechanisms adopted by international agencies for providing assistance to parliament include initiatives such as the sustainable training of the secretariat (UNDP-SEAL),

general support to the development and consolidation of political parties (NDI) and an innovative parliamentary internship programme for Kabul University students (NDI).¹⁰⁵ The most commonly chosen methods of assistance are, however, workshops, seminars and conferences. The limitations of these are widely acknowledged by the international assistance community itself, as a representative of one of these organisations explained:

*"I do not believe in 'trainings', such as gender trainings, legal trainings etc. We know how people learn, even with a two-year masters course or five-year PhD a person cannot absorb everything about a particular subject. What trainings can do, is stimulate interest or self-learning."*¹⁰⁶

It is necessary to have realistic expectations concerning the effects of workshops and trainings. Even if it is accepted that these sessions do have a positive outcome in stimulating some women's self-study, the number of women they reach in this way is a different matter altogether.

Box 7. Women's Caucus

"[The caucus] is a very good thing. I am a member...It is a good thing for women - since we established this most women come to the UNIFEM centre to meet together and to make decisions." (Interview, female MP, central Afghanistan).

"[The caucus] was a great idea, it was a good opportunity for women to come together and to talk about what they can do for women, women's solidarity, and how we can protect MOWA" (Interview, female MP, Kabul).

"...we could really work on the women's caucus, and within this it would be good to increase women's knowledge and their research skills, for them to learn how to communicate effectively with men. They should learn how to do lobbying with the heads of commissions, and learn how to give an effective presentation bringing more logic into their arguments, especially from Islam, so that they might be able to convince the mullahs of their ideas" (Interview, female MP, Kabul).

¹⁰⁴ Interview, Country Director, international agency.

¹⁰⁵ Personal communication, Program Manager, NDI.

¹⁰⁶ Interview, Program Director, international agency.

8.2 Needs and mechanisms: MP perspectives

A widely held opinion amongst women MPs is that training sessions should be arranged less often to allow for their already-full schedules. One respondent did however see workshops as a good strategy to *overcome* women's gendered time constraints:

“Workshops are very good for women because men have more time to read books and go on the internet to get information for themselves, but women do not have the time for this. So it is good that the training is provided for women... men can also sit with their groups until midnight discussing ideas but women cannot do this, they do not have the same opportunities for discussion.”¹⁰⁷

For the purposes of sustainability “stimulating self-learning” should be encouraged over the practice of spoon-feeding information to women. Nevertheless, this statement highlights the ways in which “politics” takes place in a variety of spaces, and is not by any means confined to parliament... The appreciation of space and time for discussion for women, as highlighted here, should not be dismissed.

One such space created for women and highly praised by its members is that of the NDI-UNIFEM-instigated Women's Caucus.¹⁰⁸ Unfortunately very few of those MPs spoken to are aware of its existence, and those who are aware but as yet uninvolved appear concerned about the personalities of its members. Despite this, it is an initiative which has facilitated a parliamentary forum in which women's gender interests can be discussed and consolidated.

The group is considered by many women, as demonstrated above, to be a positive step towards capacity-building. Naturally, it does not exist outside of the limitations outlined in this paper, and is strongly affected by personal-ity and identity politics which threaten its fragile unity. Yet, with the support of approximately 10 members,¹⁰⁹ the Caucus has attained some sense of Afghan ownership. One member asserted that she had helped to initiate the group:

“The caucus has been a good idea for us to get to know each other and learn to talk together. We have about 30 women, and it was [another female MP] and I who started it with UNIFEM. We meet every week and talk about women's issues and how we can be a stronger group.”¹¹⁰

Increased ownership of programmes is itself a recommendation of MPs regarding the improvement of international assistance. Providing that such ownership is and remains *Afghan*, and not *individual*, the Caucus has the potential to exist as a powerful mechanism for the representation of women's gender interests.

A strong critique of international assistance as made by MPs was that of money-wasting, which was presented as a reason against attending training workshops by both men and women. (Box 8). Suggestions were given regarding the need for international agencies and their programmes to be more accountable to MPs. An increased commitment to “downwards” accountability; towards the recipients of programmes, as opposed to donors, might contribute towards curbing criticisms regarding the disappearance of funds. The disclosure of budgetary information may be highly politicised, however, efforts could be increased

¹⁰⁷ Interview, female MP, eastern Afghanistan.

¹⁰⁸ Global Rights was also involved in the forming of the group.

¹⁰⁹ This figure varies according to interview, but 10 appears to be the lowest number given regarding core members of the group.

¹¹⁰ Interview, female MP, western Afghanistan.

Box 8. Wasting funds

"I think that these NGOs just spend money and they don't have any benefit for us. Some countries give us money but it goes to the NGOs. The workshops are run for 50 people but only 10 go to them. They have lunch in the Serena Hotel and this is a big waste of money, especially when MPs do not come... I don't like the way they spend so much on food and tea" (interview, female MP, northern Afghanistan).

"On [one] project in general they have spent US\$12 million this year - where has it gone? We cannot see the result of this money" (interview, male MP, Kabul).

through the more frequent production of concise evaluative reports, written and translated for parliamentary readership and made easily available to MPs, summarising the output of agencies' assistance and future plans.

Other improvements to international assistance as suggested by women MPs in particular include the delivery of workshop agendas in advance,¹¹¹ in order that they might attempt to familiarise themselves with the topics under discussion beforehand, and thus contribute to discussions more effectively. Adding to this, it was suggested that workshops should be more interactive,¹¹² contributing towards increased Afghan ownership of training. One frequently-mentioned suggestion made by men and women MPs, and linked to increased ownership, was that of re-aligning the content of training workshops to carry more relevance to the current context in Afghanistan. The following two statements emphasise this suggestion:

"International organisations do not know how to build the capacity of MPs. Sometimes they have experience of their own mature democracies and this does not

*match with our system, and so their advice is like a book, it is not reality, we cannot use it."*¹¹³

*"The West should not come to this country and impose their approach here. There are positive sides to Afghan culture and Islam and we have to combine these with the new rights for women. If we try to introduce Western ideas without considering Afghan culture and society it would be very difficult."*¹¹⁴

The effective representation of women's gender interests is clearly related to this point. Gender training efforts in Afghanistan, as Deniz Kandiyoti writes, are often pitched worlds apart from the specific political, socio-economic and (post-)conflict context in the country,¹¹⁵ and thus engender unrealistic expectations.¹¹⁶ Consequently, it will be necessary for the international community to re-align assistance in keeping with the Afghan context if their aim to encourage the representation of women's gender interests in parliament.

¹¹¹ Interviews, female MPs, eastern Afghanistan and northern Afghanistan.

¹¹² Interview, female MP, northern Afghanistan.

¹¹³ Interview, female MP, Kabul.

¹¹⁴ Interview, male MP, Bamiyan.

¹¹⁵ Kandiyoti, 2007, op. cit.

¹¹⁶ Exceptions to this include initiatives such as UNIFEM's training on *Sharia* law, (section 8.1).

9. Conclusions and Ways Forward

The contention of this paper is that, while women's political influence per se may have increased since their coming to parliament, women's gender interests are not strongly represented therein. Principal reasons for this include, firstly, the general lack of issues-based groups, and policy platforms in general, leading to an absence of available fora in which to raise these interests. Secondly, the generally weak connection between MPs and their constituents, and the (patronage-based) means through which existing connections are maintained, is not conducive to the collective representation of women's gender interests in parliament. Practical needs (in the form of service provision) are more highly prioritised, strengthening patronage networks and class divides. Further, the lack of support for MPs from civil society in general in promoting a gender rights agenda contributes significantly to women's gender interests remaining largely unrepresented in parliament. Thirdly, the limited female representation in Karzai's cabinet, and their containment within MOWA, is a key factor in determining why MPs are not motivated to raise women's gender interests. Perceptions of corruption in government institutions further entrench a general reluctance to raise these interests. Finally, whilst international assistance is in many ways encouraging women and men MPs in their promotion of a gender equality agenda, it is often designed and implemented according to international stipulations and thus promotes a culture of unrealistic expectations. The following policy recommendations suggest ways to encourage more substantive parliamentary representation of women's gender interests:

1. **Reserved seats.** Assuming that seats will be reserved for women in the next elections, it is recommended that the government and

electoral body re-clarify publicly the procedure well in advance. In light of the serious misconceptions currently held, it should be clarified that general seats are available to both male and female candidates. While this may not necessarily bring more women into the legislature, and may also not increase the extent to which women's gender interests are subsequently raised there, it would nonetheless serve to widen the available space for women in public perceptions. Further, the reserved seats system should be identified as a temporary measure to compensate for past inequalities, and not a means through which to provide women with an unfair advantage.

2. **Issues-based groups.** Group representation needs to be encouraged if a broad-based endorsement of a gender agenda is to be put forward. The *substantive* representation of women's gender interests will require the institutional frameworks of solid issues-based groups or parties whose commitment to the representation of these interests is a key element of their policy platforms. Serious consideration needs to be given to how this might be achieved, given that issues-based groups have not in general been successfully established in Afghanistan's political history to date. It is recommended that:

- The current stipulations regarding the formation of parliamentary groups are removed, in order that groups may form according to genuine collective interests rather than purely to meet requirements of member diversity.¹¹⁷
- In capacity-building activities international agencies focus on platform-building to encourage the development and strengthening of parliamentary groups according to a politics of ideas.

¹¹⁷ ICG, op. cit ii.

3. **“Downwards” accountability.** An increased commitment to “downwards” accountability, on the part of international organisations, towards the recipients of programmes, as opposed to donors. Documents should be produced on a regular basis, intended for MP readership, detailing agencies’ immediate plans for training and other forms of assistance. Although this by no means guarantees they will be read, it would avoid the blockage of the information flow that has taken place in the last year with all details of assistance being channelled through an individual in leadership. Further, it is suggested that a “right to information” campaign be initiated by MPs, in order to raise awareness of the need for transparency in the providing of assistance to parliament.

4. **Mainstreaming of gender training.** The limitations of trainings need to be in general more widely acknowledged, and training programmes streamlined to incorporate practical and immediately useful skills such as the development of legislation. Having said this, both male and female MPs are in need of specific training on gender issues and concerns. As such, gender should be fully integrated into all training sessions, in order to widen the application of a gender-sensitive approach and acknowledge that all parliamentary activity needs to be

considered in terms of gender equity. Further, a continued focus on the contextualisation of training, with the goal of greater Afghan ownership, is needed.

5. **Harmonisation of legislation on women’s rights.** Given that there is very little understanding of the various forms of legislation and treaty obligations that exist to promote women’s rights, it is suggested that a compilation of these is made and presented to parliament. The forthcoming National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) may well address this and should be seen as a means to consolidate legislation promoting women’s gender interests.

6. **Women in the Executive/Supreme Court.** Karzai’s commitment to women has been shown as lacking in substance. It is fundamental that he honour his promises to women MPs and bring more women into the Executive and Supreme Court. Further, it will be necessary to ensure that women’s participation at this level is not limited to certain “women’s spaces,” such as MOWA, as there is a danger that women’s contained presence will act instead as a boundary to encase women’s gender concerns in entities unable to penetrate other areas of executive activity.

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