

**The Media Representation of Afghan Women in Post-Taliban Afghanistan:  
A content analysis of women's media in Afghanistan**

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## **Abstract**

This research is about Afghan women media, focusing on media representation of Afghan women in the Afghan women media in post-Taliban Afghanistan. The Afghan women's media has been studied to figure out how they represent the Afghan women and if expected outcomes of their efforts can impact women's social condition in Afghanistan. Textual analysis of the Afghan women magazines provided the research materials for this study. Theoretical attempt has been made to reflect to the effect of the Afghan women media representation of Afghan women in post-Taliban on the perception of women in the Afghan society.

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## **Introduction**

Afghan women had experienced very bad social life during the Taliban regime. During the Taliban regime “women, who were traditionally forced to live under male domination, were now confronted with a religious extremism that sought to maintain them in submission and the treatment was cruel to an extent that is hard to describe” (Rahim 2002, p. 630). The five years of Taliban regime caused Afghan women to suffer a lot. Afghan women under the Taliban regime were imprisoned in their homes, denied access to education, health care, work. They were forced to dress in restrictive dress code. Afghan women were limited to go out from home only with their husband, brother, or father. “Afghan women living under the Taliban virtually had the world of work closed to them” (Rostami, 2005, p.36). They were forced to quit their jobs as teachers, doctors, nurses, and clerical workers, and forget about their existence as free human. According to United Nation report “ 90 % of Afghan women have suffered for a considerable time every privation known to humankind, losing all their fundamental human rights, particularly the right to life, education, health and work” (United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women , 2002 p.3)

After the fall of Taliban regime, international news channels covered the domestic and political violence against women in Afghanistan. People around the world knew Afghan women through international news, which created an image of the Afghan women as the most oppressed and vulnerable group in Afghanistan and that is basically accurate. Since the fall of the Taliban in late 2001 and the US invasion in Afghanistan the political and cultural position of Afghan women has improved substantially. As Flanders stated in her report on Afghan women titled *Speak Behind the Media Veil* (2001) “we have begun to see a lot in the media lately about the

oppression of women under the Taliban. We have begun, finally, to hear about women whom the Taliban ban from working, keep out of school, flog for wearing makeup, even execute” (Flanders, 2001, p.2 ). Such reports have observed a change after the fall of the Taliban in regard to women activities in Afghanistan, indicating that the social space for women has expanded and now in most areas e.g big cities women go to school, work outside, and participate in social affairs.

With the establishment of new government after the fall of the Taliban, Afghan women entered a new era where they constitutionally have equal rights with men. Now constitutionally Afghan women are allowed to work, get education and have equal rights with men. But their historical background and conservative traditions remains to be challenging to their attempts to raise their voices. With the help of international organizations and new Afghan constitution, their situation seems to have improved. However, many obstacles still preventing the Afghan women from enjoying equal rights and equal participation in the public space. The oppression of Afghan women is still common in many areas, where many families restrict their own, daughters, wives and sisters from participation in social life. “They are still forced into early marriages and denied a basic education” (Rahim, 2002, p. 628). As for the Taliban period, “women who endured this terrible time lost their strength of mind and creativity, they even do not think more clearly what matters in life” (Rahim, 2002, p. 629). The Taliban rule had a devastating impact on the minds of the Afghan women. Political violence against women almost completely ruined the social life of them, taking away their courage to work, take part in social life and go to schools and universities.

After the fall of the Taliban, Afghan women gradually started to take part in the social affairs. Women were allowed to work and study and take part in the elections. As a result, the social space became open to Afghan women. Afghan women activists started advocating for pro-women changes in the country. Currently, there are many women's organizations working for women in Afghanistan along with Ministry of women' affairs. In addition to their general activities for women's empowerment, these groups use media to change social position of Afghan women in Afghanistan. Right now in Afghanistan we have women's magazines, filmmaking companies and radio stations; they are working closely with women right organization to address women's problems through their writings, plays and talk shows to the Afghan government and Afghan society.

The representation of Afghan women through women's media is a mechanism to assist the process of change for Afghan women after Taliban regime. With presence of the Afghan women media, it is expected that Afghan women working in the media be engaged with representation of the women through the eyes of the Afghan women themselves. This study has been made on the representation of the Afghan women media of Afghan women after the fall of the Taliban. The research question guiding this study is how do the Afghan women media represent the Afghan women after the fall of the Taliban and how that has affected the perception and role of the Afghan women in Afghanistan from a theoretical perspective?

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<sup>1</sup>, Afghan Ministry of Women Affairs (officially the Afghan Ministry of Women's Affairs) is a new ministry in the Afghan government installation established in 2001 by Afghan Transitional Administration. MOWA is the lead agency for promoting women's advancement in Afghanistan. MOWA had a major shift in its strategy from welfare oriented, direct implementing approach to a policy influencing body by 2002. The current minister of Women's Affairs is Husn Bano Ghazanfar.

The media representation of women by media is argued to have an impact on the perception of women a society. The dominant image of Afghan women in Burqa in the media during the Taliban constructed an image of Afghan women which are subordinate, weak, oppressed, and vulnerable. The negative representation of women in the media has been argued to have negative impact on the self-esteem and confidence of women as well as negative impact on the perception of women in a society, whereas the positive representation of women is argued to change the power relation and create respect for women (Joshi, Pahad and Maniar, 2006, p. 39). In the light of such arguments, this study aims at studying the representation of Afghan women in the Afghan women media after the collapse of the Taliban administration. The study focuses on analyzing the editorials of three Afghan women's magazines. The reason behind selecting the print media is that it is easier to track and identify the patterns of development of women issues discussed in the selected print media. Selecting the women media is justified by the fact that these are the places where women are expressing their views and thoughts and take part in deliberations and discussions around women issues. Three magazines were selected from among women print media which has been active in Afghanistan for a comparatively longer period of time than other women publications.

***Key Concepts:***

*Representation:* To represent something or someone, involves a process of description, depiction or symbolization. According to Hall, "representation is the production of the meaning of the concepts in our minds through language. It is the link between concepts and language which enables us to *refer* to either the 'real' world of objects, people or events, or indeed to imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people and events" (1997, p.17). Hall suggests that there are two systems of representations. The first involves the direct associations of objects, people and

events with a set of concepts or mental representations that people hold in their minds. Meaning is therefore dependent on these correlations. The second system is language, for in order to produce meaning, these concepts need to be translated into a common language. The term 'language' is used by Hall to mean anything from written words, spoken sounds and visual images, to music, fashion and even facial expressions (1997,p. 16-19). In this study we are referring to the second system, which is the language based on words written in Afghan women's print media.

*Afghan women media:* Linda Steiner defines women's media as a "media which carries out issues particularly for a social change and justice for women, they deal with gender issues buried, ignored, or distorted in mainstream media" (Steiner 1992. p, 123). In the context of this research, Afghan women's media are meant these three women's magazines which this study is based on, and which are run by women and engaged with women issues in Afghanistan.

### ***Methodology:***

This research has adopted qualitative research approach. I have used content analysis as the method of research and analysis. "Qualitative content analysis is one of numerous research methods used to analyze text data" (Hsiu-Fang Hsieh, , Sarah E. Shannon, November 2005 p 45.) "Content analysis has a long history in research, dating back to the 18th century in Scandinavia" (Rosengren, 1981 in Hsiu-Fang Hsieh, , Sarah E. Shannon, Nov. 2005, p. 1278). Berelson has defined the content analysis as a research technique for objective, systematic and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication ( Berelson, 1952, page 15, cited in Lombard, Snyder-Duch, Bracken, October 2002, p. 687). As a method specifically intended for the study of the messages, content analysis is fundamental to the study of mass communication

(same) “Researchers regard content analysis as a flexible method for analyzing text data” (Cavanagh, 1997 in Hsieh & Shannon, November 2005, p.1277). Content analysis is a method that can be used both for inductive and deductive research depending on the purpose of the study (Satu Elo, Helvi Kengas, 2007). It has been widely used in mass communication and is believed to be a fine method of analyzing the text data. according to Hsiu-Fang Hsieh and Sarah E. Shannon, there are three approaches to doing the content analysis: conventional, directed, and summative:

“In conventional content analysis, coding categories are derived directly from the text data. With a directed approach, analysis starts with a theory or relevant research findings as guidance for initial codes. A summative content analysis involves counting and comparisons, usually of keywords or content, followed by the interpretation of the underlying context.” (Hsiu-Fang Hsieh , Sarah E. Shannon, November 2005, p. 1277).

This study has adopted a summative approach to doing the content analysis of the editorials of three women magazines published since 2002 to analyze the representation of women in these magazines considering the context of the post-Taliban developments in Afghanistan. The editorials were sampled based on convenient or judgmental sampling strategy, which allows for selecting the sources of information based on their availability. However, the editorials are selected from various serious and years of publications. The researcher could not access all the editorials of all magazines to adopt a randomized sampling. Some of the magazines, such as Rooz did not have a full collection of their publications. It was also not possible to exclude them from the study because Rooz has been one of the earliest magazines to be published soon after

the fall of the Taliban. Therefore, including Rooz had the privilege of being one of the oldest in terms of time since the fall of the Taliban and its contents provided a case where a pattern of communications can be studied over a longer period of time.

Thirty editorials have been used for analysis in this study. I have chosen women media for one main reason; and that is the change in the current identity of women which is subordinate to man and along with that there are many structural traditions that do not allow women to enjoy their right to a broader extent. The editorials come from 3 different women magazines: Rooz magazine is one of the earliest women magazines to be published after the fall of the Taliban in Afghanistan, and since that time, it has been continuously published and widely known in Afghanistan. Sadaf Magazine, also very well-known media outlet, is published by an NGO which works in the area of human rights and women rights. Some well-known women activists write articles for Sadaf. Mursal Magazine is part of a media network owned by Kilid Group. Kilid Group has several other publications and a radio, targeting different audience. Mursal is published by women working for Kilid Group for the Afghan women, bringing a more market oriented perspective to media activities.

The three different magazines bring different perspectives to women media in Afghanistan. All three are quite well-known in Afghanistan and cover presumably larger segment of the Afghan women community. The difference in their perspectives and their outreach is the main reason for choosing them for this analysis.

The editorials come from different series and years of publication covering years since 2002. The reason behind choosing the editorials is that it is mostly reflecting the official concerns, response, and stance of the magazines on the most important issues of the day. Usually, it is the

part in the print media the responsibility for which is directly attributed to their editors and owners. In addition, it makes it easier to identify patterns of changes, or consistencies in a media regarding an issue.

## **Theories and Literature**

For a long time since the emergence of modern communication system, the effect of media communication has been a subject of research and discussion contemplating around the argument that media play a key role in forming opinion and people's perceptions of things in our societies "... media is influencing our system of values, attitudes and beliefs" (Media Watch 1995 p. 62). "The hypodermic needle theory or magic bullet theory expressed the original concept of the effects of media argues that media have a direct effect on the audiences through creating a 'uniform response' to the messages that are "compatible with the sender's intentions" (Werder April 2011). This means that the media can shape our perceptions and understanding of things through continuous projections, which can result in social internalization of those communications. This way, the media creates 'uniform response' to what the media intends to create among their audience.

However, some other researchers such as Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1973) have argued that media's effect is limited by the choice of the audiences, so the media do not have a direct effect on the audience. They have argued that media's effect is limited by the audiences' selective attitude or reaction to media news and messages in the competitive media environment in which different audiences select different messages depending on their choice and level of gratification with certain messages (Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch, 1973).

There are also theories such as cumulative/cultivation and agenda setting, which have a more complex understating of the media effect than the theories stating direct or no-direct media effect. Most of contemporary media effect theories from constructivism to critical theory fall under these bigger categories of thoughts. The cultivation theory states that media affect the audience through exposing them to repetitive delivery of theme and messages or 'heavy exposure' that finally leads to audience's adaptation of media's frame of reality (Gerder, 1969) The media's heavy exposure of audience to a message leads to 'mainstreaming' and then 'resonance' of the media propaganda to which audience adopt through an ongoing process of communication. The agenda setting theory of media effect holds the argument that media sets the agenda for discussion and thinking in the audience community. It may not be successful to determine "what to think" but can direct people's attention to "what to think about" (McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D.L. 1972). This way, it is argued that media 'frame' the events which can affect our interpretation of those events and insert ideological control over audiences' world-view. The effect of framing can be cognitive and/or affective, possibly suggesting also what to think (McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D.L. 1972). So, the effect of media in this perspective can become closer to direct.

Theoretical contemplation around the media effect varies from one perspective to another. Depending on each of these perspectives the degree of influence attributed to the media also varies. Of course, every theory has its critics. All of the above theories have been criticized by different researchers. However, despite all the criticism over the media effect theories, there appears to be a general consensus that media do have influence over systems of thoughts, norms,

roles and behaviors of the public in variety of means. How do media influence us, is a different question, but the influence is inevitable.

It is understandable that the media is not the ultimate actor or the independent variable in media effect studies. From a critical approach media itself cannot be detached from the social and cultural structure of the society, and is influenced by the dominant political ideology. Obviously, the institution of media is run by individuals or groups of people who are member to the society they operate in. The taste and ideologies of the media owners affect their selection of language and communication. Being members of a society the media activists carry ideas and perceptions affected by other social institutions. According to Gamson et al. (1992) “media... provide its readers with some coherent sense of the broader social forces that affect the conditions of their everyday lives”,(Gamson 1992. p.391). Therefore, there is a coexistence of media and the audience.

The media effect theories are crucial to the study of the ‘representation’ in the media, because any representation is directed towards achieving certain goals and objectives among the targeted audience. In the context of this study, although it’s the scope is limited to the ‘women’s representation’ through analyzing texts and messages, it will reflect on what those messages might change, or challenge regarding the Afghan women condition. Therefore, in the analytical perspective it is hard to exclude ‘the effect of representation’ from ‘the representation’.

## *Media & Women*

Numerous studies have been done on the media representation of women around the world. The objectives of such studies have been to figure out how media present women, and how does media representation of women affect their role and perception in a society.

One of the studies about effect of media representation of women was organized by the Global Media Monitoring Program (GMMP), which monitored media news in 71 countries simultaneously during one day. The objective of the study was “to explore patterns of gender representation in news and how it affects public perception about the specific gender. The study discovered that globally, 19 % of individuals featured in those news stories were women and the most popular roles that they occupied were as victims, mother, wives and sex object” (Media Watch 1995, p. 34). The roles media communicate for women have their affect on public perception about women “...because media decides about which information public should receive, see, listen, and read” (Media Watch, 1995, p.60).

The study found out that the representation of women as weak, dependent or victims create negative perception of women. On the contrast media representation of women as strong and active can create a positive perception of them. The media representation of women affects both women’s perception of themselves and the social perception of them.

Media’s effect on the women’s self-perception has been confirmed by various other studies. Henderson-King, Henderson-King and Hoffmann (2001) studied women’s “perception of

themselves and their self-objectification <sup>2</sup> defined as a variable that may be involved in the female response to media stimuli” (Henderson-King et al., 2001, p.1411). The researchers chose two groups of women participants, 222 undergraduate students and 177 middle age working women. They were given two different magazines, one showing images of ideal women as think, tall and attractive, the other showing normal women. “A meta-analysis <sup>3</sup> of this experimental research concluded that the group which was shown the images of ideal thin women, consistently reported poorer body image outcomes than participants who viewed images of average weight models, plus-size models, or neutral objects, and effects were observed on body dissatisfaction, negative mood, and self-perception of physical attractiveness” (Henderson-King et al.,2001,p.1420). The study implies that women reading the magazines start thinking about their body size and try to adjust to what is communicated by the media as the ideal woman. The study also tells us about the role media play in creating image and effect public perceptions.

Another study on women coverage in news shown that the most frequent frames of women in the news discourse are as a victim, and the media’s fascination with the fragile female form and her vulnerability. It concludes with saying that women appear to be most interesting in news and in attracting more audience, when they are in most pain, when they experience most suffering (Lisa Vetten 1998). However the recommendation of this study focused on the important role of women agencies/organization in different representation of women through their own media. It

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<sup>2</sup> Self-Objectification is an act of viewing oneself superficially (only skin-deep), regarding one's attractiveness, sex appeal, measurements, and weight as more important than health, fitness, strength, etc. it can result in shame, anxiety, and lack of self-esteem, (Henderson-King, et al., 2001, p. 1411)

<sup>3</sup> Meta-analysis is the statistical procedure for combining data from multiple studies. When the treatment effect (or effect size) is consistent from one study to the next, meta-analysis can be used to identify this common effect. When the effect varies from one study to the next, meta-analysis may be used to identify the reason for the variation. (Borenstein et al., 2007, p.78)

says that women could only be rightly introduced and present to any society by women themselves.

It is argued that women's media plays even a stronger role in changing the image of women and increasing the self-confidence among them (Rahbani 2010). The media run by women can serve as instrument of change and empowerment for women which can have important impacts on the social condition of women in longer run. A study that shows the changes in women condition in Arab society due to positive representation of women in media was conducted by Rahbani (2010). She aimed at examining whether Arab women social position changed as they increased their "presence" in Arab media. She studied three Arab countries, Sudan, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia where she studied, TV show, radio, cinema, film, drama, news, sports, commercials, newspapers, magazines, and others.' (Rahbani 2010, p. 4), she found that "nowadays, Arab women are turning to media as a means for their empowerment, as a medium for education that overcomes barriers of distance and time, and as a tool to advance their progress and development in their communities" (Rahbani, 2010, P. 21). She argues that, "the new information technologies have allowed women in Arab world to be seen as equal to men in their ability to discuss, investigate, report and present various issues" (Rahbani, 2010, p. 11). These media movements caused a change in the constitution of two Arab countries, when they announced women participation in election and right to vote. Women nowadays hold high level positions in government (Rahbani, 2010). In Afghanistan, though women have equal constitutional rights with men, the use of media as means advocacy and education is expected to bring positive changes in perceptions towards women, because media can affect the public discourses and cultural values.

The use of media by women themselves enables them to take part in the social construction and deconstruction of the image and perception of women in a society. The women's media can turn into an important advocacy tool the importance of which has been recognized by women rights activists and women social movements around the world. Rakow (1992) confirms this account believing that women rights movements "recognized the value of establishing and operating their own communication media, literally making their own meaning and communicating it to one another across space and over time" (Rakow, 1992.p, 66). All the way through the history of women rights media were their source of communication, without which nobody would hear their voices. Establishing women's media was the base for sharing their objective. Without communication and sharing their ideology and thoughts, no one would know what women wanted.

The women's active presence in media can have a transformative effect on the social behavior regarding taboo communications. Vetten (1998), conducted research in 1997 on 'reporting on rape in south Africa' in which she tried to understand how news coverage of rape in the news channels affects social behaviour of women. Studying three news channels Vetten found out that the most frequent image of women in those channels were as victims, fragile, and vulnerable (Vetten 1998, p.43). The study concluded that negative representation of women in media can have both negative and positive effects. It has negative effect on the self-perception of women of their social role, but positive effect in terms of mobilizing a social protest against it. She argues that the number of rape cases covered in media during the six months increased by 50%, implying that more women started to talk about it and seek justice (Vetten 1998, p. 56). Similar

observation was made on the role of women media in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan the presence of women media has enabled them to take part in the social communication process, trying to fight for women's rights and equality. Rostami (2005) conducted a study on 'Afghan Women's Resistance and Struggle for their voices'. Her aim was to identify different perceived needs of women in the process of reconstruction in Afghanistan, particularly in relation to the media. Rostami interviewed 126 women from different parts of the country and concluded that:

“Afghan women should be seen as agents of change, which means to change the existing pattern of behavior in Afghan social system. To help Afghan women get equal rights and equal access to all social and political affairs and to facilitate this process, women in Afghanistan felt the media could play an important role by advocating women's rights socially and politically, because media has the capacity to make a very positive contribution towards social change in any society. The media can provide opportunity for women to tell their stories and share their experiences. This is a healing process”(Rostami, 2005, p .34).

Women's media can play a role in breaking the taboos surrounding women's experiences, since media are a chronicler of events, an informer, an educator, a transformative space and a tool to change society. This applies fully to the case of African women as well the Afghan women. The media offers the opportunity for women to speak out and take control of the discourses on women issues and use the existing discourses in their favor. Rostami found out that Afghan women required access to the media in order to demand the protection of law for women in the family and their rights to equality of opportunity in education and employment. Rostami, (2005)

quotes one of participants (her name was not mentioned) as saying “we need radio and television programs, dramas and articles in newspapers and magazines to discuss our own issues....The media had to represent the role of women in post-Taliban era and disseminate information about role models in order to build the new image of Afghan women” (Rostami, 2005, p.32). This study brought up the most important areas which can help women in Afghanistan to change their role in society. Afghan women’s media can help this process of change for Afghan women, because they have the knowledge of woman history, Afghan culture and current challenges. Afghan women’s media are also a mechanism through which Afghan women represent, educate and develop socially accepted discourse with other Afghan women and Afghan society as a whole.

### **Summary of the Research Findings**

The systematic analysis of the Afghan women’s media in the present study show that the Afghan women media present the Afghan women still as largely marginalized group who are victims of violence, subordinated to masculine culture, and structurally discriminated against. They are less aware of their rights and facing serious problems in the areas of education, health and economic participation that limit their capabilities to enjoy their full rights. However, this study showed that the Afghan women media use these images as sign of protest. The Afghan women’s media are deeply engaged in analyzing the condition of women and struggle to transform the condition for women through advocating for equality and participation in the public space, and deconstruct the image of women in the traditional culture.

Issues of inequality, dominance of traditional values, and participation in the public affairs are major topics that have been consistently discussed in the women media in Afghanistan. During

this study, these topics appeared to form an identifiable pattern, which can indicate that these topics have been the most dominant for the past some years in the Afghan women media.

The issue of gender equality is discussed consistently and extensively in the Afghan women media. It is addressed in a contextual sense to cover variety of issues that have affected the condition of women in Afghanistan. The condition of inequality is diagnosed and a thorough analysis of the problems is offered. The issue of inequality stands on the top of issues addressed in the Afghan women media. It is because the Afghan women have been dominated by the masculine values in a patriarchal society. In addition, political violence against women and the domination of the radical groups especially during the Taliban period has marginalized the Afghan women. The Afghan women have been deprived of many rights that can guarantee the equality of men and women. The Afghan women's media regard women to be equal to men and capable of doing all what men can do. The physiological difference between men and women cannot create unequal social condition between men and women. According to the understanding of the Afghan women's media studied in this research, the inequality is created by certain factors which vary from context to context. Traditional and political constrains have been major issues concerning the situation of the Afghan women that have prevented them from practicing equal rights and opportunities with their male fellow citizens. Inequality and violence against women have been a major and consistent issue spoken about in the editorials of the magazines studied in this research.

Whereas the role of women in development of a country is regarded to be crucial, the Afghan women according to the Afghan women media lack sufficient attention in terms of empowering their role in the society. Women have poor health, low level of education and limited participation in the public space. Women's activities are limited to housework, which are not

productive economically. These have had devastating effects on both the condition of women and the development of the country.

The Afghan women media try to represent the Afghan women in a way that their problems are not isolated from the general society, but interlinked with each other. They show to the public and their audience that the problems of women in Afghanistan are the problems of the society and unless the women's issues are not addressed in a proper way, it has implications for the entire society. In other words, the problems of women, the Afghan women's media try to say, is a social problem and hence, recognition of their rights, their participation in the public sphere, and addressing of their needs is extremely crucial for the societal wellbeing.

The analysis of the Afghan women media in this study indicated that Afghan women's media try to bring women issues to the center of social and economic development in Afghanistan. The analysis also showed that that Afghan women media is involved in deconstruction of the perception of women in Afghanistan through using the local knowledge and cultural means such as religious texts, historical and scientific arguments. The Afghan women media represent the Afghan women –though still as marginalized, vulnerable and discriminated against due to structural inequalities – as socially and politically equally competent as men. Further the Afghan women media use the case to create a social discourse for change in favor of gender equality in Afghanistan.

## **Analysis**

Five major categories of words and messages have been created under this study where communications and messages have been sorted. These include equality, power/empowerment,

struggle, marginalization, and development. Each of these categories appeared as topics dominating the communications presented in the editorials of the three magazines.

### ***Equality: Universal Women VS Afghan Women***

In Afghanistan “That there are so many social barriers which prevent Afghan women from equal participation and practicing their civil rights” ( Rooz, no. 81. 2009).<sup>4</sup>

“Violence against women, traditional culture regarding women status, low awareness of women about their rights, and many other problems are the obstacles on the way of Afghan women to achieve equal rights” (Roоз Magazine, no 69, Year 2007).

According to the Afghan women’s media, their equal rights are limited by tradition, politics, lack of education, lack of representation in public offices, and lack of awareness about women rights amongst women. The message discusses a structural barrier in the Afghan society which affects the condition of Afghan women in terms of gender equality. The message indicates that the problems regarding gender equality in Afghanistan have greater causes; the inequality has been produced due several structural factors that all in all have affected the situation of women. It also presents a deeper understanding of the problem in a larger cultural and historical context. The inequality in this perspective seems to be inherent in the very structure of the Afghan society, which allows for the use of violence against women, and prevents them from equally participating in the Afghan society. The message also presents an understanding of the problem, which attributes it to the low awareness of women of their rights. Low awareness about their rights makes women more vulnerable to violence as they do not understand the scope of their rights as women in the Afghan society.

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<sup>4</sup> All passages from the Afghan women media editorials quoted in this research are translated from Dari into English by the author. They are fully cited for verification.

After the fall of the Taliban and the establishment of a new government, the women's rights were guaranteed in the Afghan constitution; however, the situation of the Afghan women has not improved much. The Rooz magazine editorial reflects on it stating:

“Although new constitution supports women participation and their presence in different social, economical and political affairs, due to inequality in the local culture, women are not able to practice their basic rights” (Rooz, 2009 No. 81).

The message re-confirms the interpretation of the Afghan women journalists of the causes of their inequality in the Afghan society, which is regarded to be structural. The messages above represent the Afghan women as naturally equal to men, but their condition has been affected by various structural factors.

### ***Struggle for Change: Afghan women capable of changing their condition***

The messages from the analysis of the editorials reflect that the Afghan women are seen capable to change their condition in favor of general equality. The protest against the gender inequality is a consistent advocacy theme in all women print media studied in this research. The messages coming out of the women print media demand for more practical and visible improvements in the condition of the Afghan women.

“Theoretically men and women are having equal rights in all social and political arenas, but practically there has not been done any work for the problems that women are facing in our society” (Mursal. 2009. NO 349)

“However, many government officials talked a lot about women rights and their equal participation in political and social affairs, but now people understood that those speeches are only up to words and never come to action” (Rooz, 2009. No. 81).

“Although after the fall of Taliban regime, we can see many changes and development for women condition in our country, but the real beauty of equality and freedom is not seen yet....Then let’s try and don’t give up to struggle for women right and equality” (Sadaf ,2004. NO. 22).

The passages quoted above indicate that the Afghan women media advocate for struggle to improve the condition of women towards gender equality in Afghanistan. The struggle for equality is perceived to be the responsibility of the Afghan women themselves. It implies an understanding of the Afghan women who has a responsibility before herself to act for the betterment of the condition she is living in. Such passages try to encourage greater activism amongst Afghan women and represent the Afghan women as capable of changing their condition. They shall work hard towards gaining equal rights with men:

“...but this should not stop our strong and dedicated women from fighting against inequality” (Sadaf, 2003. NO .12)

“...But the important point is here, our sisters should follow and practice their right on daily base, and fight against inequality and get their right from this cruel society. (Mursal, 2006, NO. 350)

The Afghan women’s media see it as its responsibility to reflect on the existing inequalities and struggle for the realization of the women’s rights in the country. Giving this role the Afghan

women media indicates that the Afghan media representatives are well aware of the role and importance of the media in initiating changes:

“Thus, the media should reflect the current inequality between men and women as well as they should try to eradicate this inequality. They should play a significant role to improve women’s situation and make women participate in social space” (Rooz 2009, NO. 75)

### ***Struggle: Caution and Liberation***

Understandably, caught between traditions and the requirements for a modern and open society, the Afghan women media advocate a cautious move forward in order to avoid risks associated with efforts of liberation.

“To achieve our utopia, Afghan women should fight to get their equal right..... To start and go on this way, we should plan and think over and over because we do not want to create problems for our families and society. But our basic rights should not be compromised. (Sadaf, 2003, NO.12)”

Experiencing centuries of violence in different forms, the Afghan women according to the Afghan women media shall be cautious about liberating women. The Afghan women’s media represent the Afghan women as to have a responsibility before their families and the society. The women that such passages represent are free, but they are conditioned to practice their universal rights, and at the same time, the practice of their rights shall not create problems for their families and the society.

The nature of such arguments seems to be contradictory. However, it is understandable from the perspective of Afghan women that liberation from traditions and culture is not all easy and can

initiate problems in the society. Given that in some cases the Afghan culture has been extremely hostile to liberate women such concerns seem to be legitimate. However, as it is explicit in the passage above, the basic rights of women shall not be compromised. These rights include access to education and health facilities, right to work and freedom of choice:

“Women of Afghanistan have the right to work, right to get education, right to elect and to be elected, and have equal rights as men, all these came in our constitution”( Rooz , 2007, NO. 69)

The Afghan women media represent the Afghan women as to be aware of their responsibilities to respect the cultural sensitivity in order to create a safe environment for their activities. Between the modernity of rights and the tradition of their role, the Afghan women are introduced in the Afghan women media as to be able to reconcile work and home. They perceive studying and working outside and being a mother complementing each other. “An educated mother can present an educated, healthy and successful child to our society” (Sadaf, 2006. No.19). “If we don’t not consider women’s equal participation in getting higher education, we cannot be hopeful for a developed society ( Rooz, 2008. No 87).”

Being an Afghan woman and enjoying the universal women rights, which means to be the universal woman, is a critical issue of women identity communication in the Afghan women media. As the analyses show that the Afghan women are presented in the Afghan women media as to have the universal women’s rights, but they shall not forget about their identity as Afghan women. This is a problematic issue because it concerns the classic issue of reconciliation between tradition and modernity. The question comes in that in practice, how could Afghan women reconcile the hostile traditional rules for women and the universal rights? In fact, it

seems to be extremely difficult to provide a mechanism which can offer the Afghan women rights and freedoms within the framework of traditional norms. But studying the Afghan women media in this research shows that such an effort has been in place through referring to religious sources that allow for greater participation of women in social sphere. It is supplemented with discussion of role of women in the human as well as the Afghan history, which all together provides a context for deconstruction of the image of women in the Afghan traditional culture which is analyzed in the following.

### ***Struggle: Deconstructing the Image of women***

One of the qualities of the Afghan women's media is that it addresses the women issues in a contextual framework with reference to the social setting and structural conditions that can affect the status of women in the Afghan society. As described earlier, it gives a picture of the Afghan women in a 'landscape' rather than giving a 'portrait'<sup>5</sup> picture of her. The landscape analysis of the situation of women in Afghanistan requires addressing of variety of variables that play in to create the current condition for the women in Afghanistan.

It appears that the Afghan women's media has understood that without addressing the cultural aspects of gender inequality it will be hard to create an environment for equality in Afghanistan. The analysis of the editorials from the three Afghan women magazines reveals that the Afghan women media is struggling hard to deconstruct the image of women in the traditional Afghan culture. As quoted before, "traditional culture stance regarding women status" ( Rooz, 2007, No 69), has created obstacles for gender equality in Afghanistan. Traditional cultural stance on women is probably the underlying factor behind legitimizing violence against women. Therefore,

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<sup>5</sup> I have tried to differentiate between two different types of representations by using Portrait, as a representation independent of the context, i.g. only unequal, and Landscape, as representation within a context, i.e. factors creating inequality.

the Afghan women media address this aspect of the women's live through an attempt to deconstruct the image of the women in the traditional culture of the Afghans. The Afghan women media try to deconstruct the image of women in three aspects: religious, national history, and human history. In all these aspects the attempt is to show the women are and have been equal to men and in some cases, women even have been privileged than men. The Afghan women's media utilizes verses from Quran and Hadith (sayings of Prophet Muhammad) to show that women and men are equal creatures of God, so there should not be any difference between and discrimination against them. "In Islam woman introduced equal to man and has the same right as other human being has to have it (Roos 2008. No.87)". In some cases in religious texts, women should be even privileged:

"In this regard our Messenger says, "God loves those parents, who loves their children equally and don't discriminate among them, even when they kiss them. In case they have to choose between them, they have to choose girls" ( Roos 2007. NO. 64.).

According to the Afghan women's media, the natural equality of women and men are recognized in different parts of the Quran. Therefore, violence against women and discriminations against women is not allowed in Islam.

"It is important to mention that, from Islamic point of view men and women are equal and they don't have any differences. They can work side to side with each other in different area of social and political matters. There is no doubt that in different part of Quran comes which says that, woman and man are equal, they only have some differences in live base functions according to their physical nature (Roos, 2009 NO. 89)".

The attempt to deconstruct the image of the Afghan women in the traditional culture, which has introduced women as subordinate and weak in relation to men goes beyond religious reflections. For instance, in order to give it greater sense of national flavor, the Afghan women media glorify the role of the Afghan women in struggle against outside invaders in which women stood shoulder by shoulder with men and defended from the country:

“From the time in history that Afghanistan had fought for its freedom and never let other country to rule on them, the role of women in struggling for their freedom and equal right should not be underestimated, because women role in those wars were not less than men. (Sadaf, 2008. NO 13)”

In order to contextualize the topic of gender equality, the Afghan women’s media refer to the historical development of the human society. The effort is to refute the argument of inherent inequality between men and women and show it to be subject to political and environment factors.

“From the beginning of human life, there were no men or women dominated societies. There was an equal system of job division where men and women had their specific duties. There was nothing superior to about any of them. During the Stone Age women even got more power and prestige, because in this stage agriculture was the main source of income. Women are called the mother of environment and nature. Besides working in the agriculture sector women started weaving and invented cloths. These things resulted in giving more importance to the role of women in human society (Sadaf, 2002, NO 21)”

Such argumentations are targeting the very cultural understanding of the women in the traditional societies which regard women to be inherently subordinate to men. This effort to

deconstruct the image of the women by the Afghan women's media is an interesting mechanism of fighting for equality. The effort is made to delegitimize violence against women and gender inequality in the cultural context of Afghanistan, which has allowed for gross violation of human rights and women's rights. Such approach is very helpful in providing legitimate arguments for equality.

The Afghan women's media consistently attempt to deconstruct the image of the women in the traditional culture, trying to emphasize on the importance the women have had throughout the history. They question the inherent inequality of men and women referring to historical periods in which women had the central role in the human societies. "Many history researches show that throughout the history women were not isolated but there were a time when they were very active in social affairs of the human societies. That era was named "mother dominated era" or mother kingdom (Sadaf. 2002, No 21, 2002). Such messages are spread to challenge the dominating perception in the conservative communities in the Afghan society, which tend to believe that there is inherent inequality between men and women. Considering the time this message was communicated (2002) when the repressive regime of Taliban had just out of power, the message touches upon an important political issue. The message underlines the role of politics and abuse of power that has marginalized women in the history. It is intended to say that it is not nature that has pushed women in the peripheries but politics such as the Taliban ideology. Therefore, the difference between men and women is a political differentiation that has no essential ground. As the term of "mother kingdom" convey, there has been periods in the human history that women had been more central to the human society than men.

In order to justify the deconstruction of the traditional perception of women as being unequal to men, the Afghan women media refer to verses in the Quran to bring legitimacy to their claims.

“Most of family violence against women comes from very old and pointless thoughts which have become part the culture. In realty those kinds of thoughts never come from Islam. Islam was the first religion which saved women from being buried alive. Those thoughts and culture should be changed (Roouz 2008, No 87)”. Such communications introduce the Afghan women as someone who is positioned to interpret the religion by themselves. This is image of the Afghan women which has been neglected in the studies on Afghan women. Considering that the interpretation of the religion has been a domain exclusively controlled by men clergy, the Afghan women allowing them to utilize the arguments in religion in defense of their equality and rights is an interesting pattern of development. This represents a different image of the Afghan women to readers as the authorities on their own affairs to challenge the fundamentalist interpretation of Islam.

The attempts to deconstruct the image of the Afghan women in the traditional culture can theoretically be effective in engaging the society in a deliberative process regarding women issues. It in turn helps the process to become more rationalized and hence, open the social and cultural space in Afghanistan. However, as it appears from the analysis of the passages from the editorials of the Afghan women magazines, the Afghan women are presented as to have a strong local and cultural identity. In some cases, repeated references given to Islam in the discussion of women’s rights indicate the prevalence of Islamic identity as a red line with regards to discussion of women’s rights. But in the passages quoted one can see clearly that all attempts are made to picture the Afghan women as the right holder, and variety of arguments are put forward to call for greater opportunities and freedom for Afghan women.

### ***Struggle: Centering women to fight marginalization***

The analysis of the Afghan women's media provides a complex understanding of women issues in Afghanistan and other problems associated with it. Another important issue that the Afghan women media has been talking about extensively since 2002 is the costs associated with marginalization of women that undermines overall development and human wellbeing in a society. The development and wellbeing of the human society has been attributed to recognition and participation of women in public space.

The Afghan women's media represent the women's role in development and wellbeing of the human society as extremely important the recognition of which can help underdeveloped societies to improve the human living condition. Added to the efforts of deconstruction of the image of women in the traditional culture of Afghanistan, the economic and development-related reasoning for importance of women's participation in the public sphere can make an appealing argument for the recognition of the rights of women:

“In many developed countries the role of men and women are equally considered in economical structure. In underdeveloped countries there are many factors which cause its underdevelopment; one of those factors is discrimination against women” (Sadaf 2005. NO .12)”

According to the selected editorials from Sadaf Magazine the reasons that affect the performance of women in the area of development are:

1. “Women's activities are limited to housework. They do not participate in social life.
2. Lack of women present in productive work
3. Low working capacity and skills

4. Low educational level among women” (Sadaf, 2005, No.12.).

Such arguments are made to address complex issues surrounding Afghanistan and link them to the issues of Afghan women. These efforts are made to add further legitimacy and rational for the recognition of the rights of women. The audiences of such arguments seem to be both Afghan women and the Afghan society as a whole. For the Afghan women, such reasoning is expected to raise the level of confidence and the importance of women position in an open society. As for the Afghan society, the argument is made to signify the importance of women participation in the development of Afghanistan.

The participation of women in the public sphere is regarded by the Afghan women media as determining for the development of the country as well as a condition that can help women gain equal positions with that of men:

“Women participation on different social arena will facilitate to diminish inequality and create the base for development and stability. Thus it is very important to say that development will never come to a country without women participation (Afghan women are emphasizing on the importance of their vote in presidential and parliamentary election, Rooz 2009. No .85)

However, in the understanding of the Afghan women’s media, the participation of women in public sphere in turn is subject to the political and social rights of women. Therefore, gender equality, women’s rights and participation in social space, and development are all interrelated and complementing each other:

“It is important to mention that economical right of women depends on their political and social rights, which will result their relive from violence, improvement toward education and good health, work opportunities, and all their human rights (Sadaf, 2005. No.12)”.

Consequently, the study of the Afghan women’s media indicate development and wellbeing the Afghan society require pro-women attitude and pro-women programs at all aspects of life. In order to make the role of women in development of Afghanistan more effective, the study of the Afghan women media imply that we shall empower women through addressing their needs in all levels that can lead to economic productivity and eventually to the development of the country.

There is a consistent emphasis on the importance of women’s participation in the political and economic affairs of the country in the Afghan women media as means to providing structural support for women. Women’s participation is thought to be determining the prospect to development in vision promoted by the Afghan women media. “It is important to know that in a country where violence against women exists, there is no civilization and economic development (Roоз, 2008, No 87)”. In the vision the Afghan women media is propagating, the violence against women is not rejected based on the human rights values only, but they intend to show the cost of violence to the overall development of the country. So, the message is sent to Afghan society that violence against women is not bad only from a human rights and moral perspective, but also because it harms the prospect for the development of the country. In other words, the message means that it is irrational to allow violence against women because it costs too much for the country. “Because women make half of our society, if this half does not develop, the entire country fails (Roоз 2008, No. 87). Violence is perceived to push women in the margins of the society and prevent them from development. If so, the society in its entirety remains underdeveloped.

In regards to the role of women political decision making in the country, the Afghan women media though admitting the progress made, represent the Afghan women as mostly neglected and their role to be mostly symbolic. “While several years have passed since the fall of Taliban, we see a limited number of women who hold senior political positions. We want greater participation of women in social and political areas” (Mursal, 2007 No 340). The Afghan women media attribute a greater and real role for women in the public affairs to their own effort. “We also want our Afghan sisters to take part widely in political and social affairs and show their existence to public (Mursal, 2006 .No 340).

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

The representation of women in media and its effect on the women behavior and role in the society has been an issue of interest by the communication and social science researchers. Plenty of studies have been done on the topic. The GMMP study mentioned earlier was conducted with “an objective to explore patterns of gender representation in news and how it affects public perception about the specific gender. The study discovered that globally, 19 % of individuals featured in those news stories were women and the most popular roles that they occupied were as victims, mother, wives and sex object” (Media Watch 1995, p. 34).

The study concluded that the “roles, which news media has represented to public had their effect on public perception about woman in that society, because media decides about which information public should receive, see, listen, and read” (Media Watch, 1995, p.60). The important lesson learned from this study is that media representation of women can shape the perceptions and attitudes as well as the role of women in a society. The positive representation of

women as strong, independent, educated and working in high level positions would help other women to increase their confidence as well as shape a perception of women in a society which is respectful and trusting. Negative representation of women as marginal, passive, uneducated and dependent will have negative impact on the self esteem of women as well as shape a perception in a society which looks down at women.

In Afghanistan, the representation of Afghan women as 'weak' and 'dependent' in the local culture has contributed into empowering masculine values and marginalizing the role of women in the society. Violence against women can only be understood from this perspective. The superiority of masculine values in a patriarchal culture justifies marginalization of women and use of violence against them. In Afghanistan, rightly put by Rooz editorial, "...due to inequality in the local culture, women are not able to practice their basic rights" (Rooz, 2009 No. 81).

As argued media has a strong role in shaping our perception of things. The impacts of the media representation of women particularly, have been argued to transform the power relation between men and the women. Joshi Pahad and Maniar (2006) have argued that "The images of women emerging from the print media would reflect distribution of power and mechanisms of control in a vivid way. When the framework of media expands to admit women in their development stories, it would reflect this expansion. This way, the ideological control on women's self-perceptions will gradually vanish and women will speak in their own voice" (Joshi, Pahad and Maniar, 2006, p. 39).

The women ownership of the media can help women control the representation of women in media and get their independent voice. In terms of Pahad and Maniar's theory, the ideological control on women's self-perception is more likely when women own the media. In the context of

the Afghan women media, it is expected that the Afghan women media will have the opportunity to challenge the existing women perception of them as weak and subordinate in the local culture. In the review of the editorials from the selected women print media from a period, it appears that the Afghan women have got their independent voice, and have become able to raise their concerns and take position on the issues discussed in the Afghan society. This is a significant development if compared with a decade ago, when the international organizations spoke on behalf the Afghan women and claimed their rights.

“Although international organizations are working to improve the situation of Afghan women, but the role of Afghan women themselves is very important in this process. Women have to try their best to get their rights. There is a saying, “right is not given, but taken. We have to take our rights (Roos 2007, No. 69).”

Such passages are sprinkled throughout other women publications which advocate a more active presence of women in public affairs in Afghanistan. Such communications come to contrast with an image of the Afghan women that are marginalized and not given a chance to speak of their wills and rights. Considering the prevalence of the visual media which are owned by men in Afghanistan, the extent to which Afghan women media can affect the perception of women in Afghanistan is expected to be very limited. However, the study of the Afghan women’s media show that a women voice has emerged in the country which is trying to struggle for getting ideological control over the women’s perception in the society. The behavior of the Afghan women’s media in terms of attempts to deconstruct the image of women through utilizing the religious texts and verses imply that a struggle has been in a place over the ideological control over the issues of women. This is a challenge to the authority of the traditional religious institutions that have had a full control over the women issues for centuries in Afghanistan. From

a power relation perspective, struggle for the ideological control over the women issues can have important implications for the Afghan society. These implications include perception of women as capable of communicating their role and identity and reflect on the society around. Theoretically, this might help produce a positive perception of women in Afghanistan.

The Afghan women's representation in the Afghan women media provides a fruitful insight about how Afghan women are perceived in Afghanistan by women themselves, and how are they trying to address women issues from an inner perspective. The analysis of editorials from *Rooz*, *Mursal*, and *Sadaf* magazines indicate that the Afghan women, despite structural problems that they face in regards to realization of their ideas and rights, have got their independent voice and advocate strongly on behalf of the Afghan women on major women issues like equality of rights and freedom of choice.

Afghan women media also give a picture of "oppressed women". However, the Afghan women media use the image of oppressed women as sign of protest rather than acceptance of their condition. Further, the discussion of women issues by the Afghan women media shows that they are able to analyze the conditions that led to the oppressions and violence against women. This is an important aspect of the Afghan women media with women issues in Afghanistan which addresses the ideological control over the women issues in the Afghan society.

In addition compared to the western media, the Afghan women media act not as an observer regarding the women issues, but as agent of change and advocacy to change the condition of women. A major theme coming out of the analysis of the editorials in this research was the deconstruction of the image and identity of women in the traditional cultural context of Afghanistan. This signals the struggle for ideological control over the image and perception of

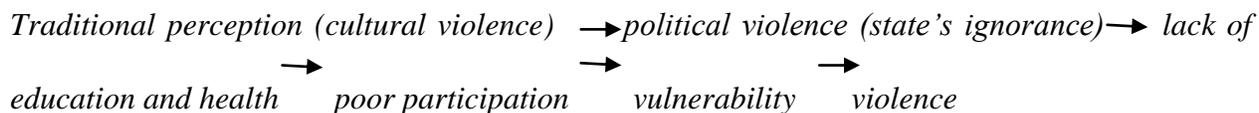
women in Afghanistan which might theoretically have important implication for gender power relations in the traditional Afghan society. Linda Steiner in the book “Women Making Meaning” edited by Lana F. Rakow, says that, “as long as magazines, newspapers, and media in whole are controlled by men, women’s idea never can get before the public”. (Steiner, 1992.p, 121) she continues that this is not the only reason why women established their independent media. It was to articulate and dramatize their emerging interest, to nourish and defined an identity that imbues their lives with meaning (Rakow 1992.p123). The use of media by the Afghan women to talk about their issues and take part in deconstruction of their perception in the Afghan context is a proper response to such theories and ideas as put forth by Steiner.

In the process of ideological control over the perception and representation of women in Afghanistan, the Afghan women media deal with the two different images of women in Afghanistan in terms of inserting the ideological control over their perception in the Afghan society. One is the new image of Afghan women who are free, independent, equal to man, and other one is traditional Afghan women, who did not have equal rights with Afghan men throughout the country’s history. The emergence of Afghan women’s media can help Afghan women ‘relocate their statuses in the Afghan society. Women’s media can give hand Afghan women to trounce the cultural sensitivity toward new image of Afghan women as well pave the way for public to accept these changes in Afghan society. This process needs local knowledge of Afghan society, courage and personal understanding of the Afghan women position to represent modern Afghan women in an acceptable manner to a traditional society like Afghanistan.

For effective engagement with Afghan women’s issue in the Afghan social and cultural context, it is necessary for the Afghan women media to use their local knowledge of the Afghan society and particularly the root problems that affect women condition in Afghanistan. Interestingly, this

has been the case with the Afghan women media. From the analysis of the editorials of the three Afghan women magazines, it appears that the Afghan women media have come to an understanding of chain of issues that perpetuate their marginalization and violence against them.

The chain of issues/problems can be drawn as in the following:



In order to address this chain of the problem, a fundamental long term approach is needed. In the Afghan women media, the response is education.

“There is no doubt that having access to higher education and having professional skills is the key for success and personal development of any one. Getting higher education is an effective tool for identity creation and achieving in good political and social position” (Roos , 2008, NO .78).

Education can empower women to address the cultural violence through engaging in deconstruction of traditional perceptions of women in Afghanistan the way the Afghan women media is currently doing it. Education is viewed as enlightenment tool for women in the Afghan society.

Gerson, a journalist for *the Washington Post Magazine*, once stated that the Afghan women whom, Gerson met wanted to take a different approach for changing their condition. “Women in Afghanistan argue that ‘education’ is the most important response to the current challenge. By education, they do not mean only literacy. They want people to be educated in the values of our own religion” (Gerson July 2009, p.6). According to Rostami ( 2007) “in Afghanistan, many

believe that in their own way, and according to their own culture, they can change their communities to accept the participation of women in the economy and the society and find legitimate roles for women in the process of reconstruction” (Rostami, 2007, p.46). The Afghan women themselves approach this development with caution and reservation of local sensitivities, saying that “we need a positive approach for respect and legal protection from within our religious tradition. We do not seek to overturn our cultural order but we want to expand and humanize it” (Gerson 10 July, 2009, p.6).

The analysis of the Afghan women media presents a powerful case of Afghan women media’s participation in changing the situation of the women in Afghanistan. During the Taliban, the dominant image of the Afghan women in the international media showed them as “weak, oppressed, and in need of liberation, they are seen as the victims of their own male-dominated culture” (Havedal 2007, p. 51). But now Afghan women media are trying to represent them in a different way showing them struggling for equality, and struggling to deconstruct the perception of the women in the Afghan society. This process of communication is likely to change their perception of women in the Afghan society, giving women self-confidence and transforming the gender communication in the Afghan society.

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