

# AFGHANISTAN

Women, too often the innocent victims of conflict and violence, are just as likely to be the unsung champions of reconstruction and reconciliation. Women play a central role in reuniting shattered families and rebuilding fractured communities, often with little official support. Their plight is symptomatic of the far greater marginalization many women experience in their daily lives. Despite national and international agreements guaranteeing equality, many women are unable to exercise their rights and realize their full potential. Such is the case in Afghanistan.

IDRC supports research that sheds light on why women's hard-won gains continue to fall short of expectations and commitments, and that proposes concrete steps to redress the situation. In former conflict zones, Centre-supported researchers are examining ways to tap into movements for social change to advance justice and equity for women. This is one focus of IDRC's Women's Rights and Citizenship program, created in 2006.

Underpinning IDRC's work in Afghanistan is 36 years of research partnerships and valuable know-how in postwar peacebuilding. Experience shows that research in itself can be an instrument for dialogue, trust building, and reconciliation. By strengthening their own research capacity and applying the knowledge gained to create sound policies, the people of Afghanistan can strengthen their own chances for peace, order, and good government.



Maureen O'Neil  
President, IDRC

## TOWARD TRUE CITIZENSHIP

Afghanistan's constitution, passed in December 2003, marked a victory for women: to be considered citizens. But the step from intent to reality is a long one.

The same is true in most countries of the Middle East and North Africa where state and society too often treat women as second-class citizens. For the average woman in many Arab countries, basic citizenship rights such as the right to vote,

to obtain an identity card or a passport — even to send their children to school, to marry, and to travel — either don't exist or require the approval of a male family member.

The situation is worse for many Arab women who marry foreigners: they cannot extend their citizenship to their husbands and children. And so the children of women whose husbands are not a national of the country in which they reside are



Steve Evans

## BUILDING DEMOCRACY

In his September 2006 speech to Canada's Parliament, Afghan President Hamid Karzai noted, "A democratic nation is not built overnight." Earlier, in June, 13 of his Parliamentary officers were in Canada learning how Canada's Parliament functions, touching on fundamental issues such as the roles and responsibilities of parliamentarians. The officers also met with Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper. IDRC, Foreign Affairs Canada, and the Parliamentary Centre organized the tour.

[www.parlcent.ca](http://www.parlcent.ca)

denied citizenship and the rights it confers. They do not, in effect, have a nationality in their own birthplace. This inequality not only denies women their basic rights as citizens, it also denies children their basic human rights. "My only worry is my children," Fatmeh Rahhal, a Beirut mother, says in the documentary *My Child, the Foreigner*. "They cannot work. How will they have a decent future?"

(continues)

Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) is one of the world's leading institutions in the generation and application of new knowledge to meet the challenges of international development. For more than 35 years, IDRC has worked in close collaboration with researchers from the developing world in their search for the means to build healthier, more equitable, and more prosperous societies.

International Development Research Centre • PO Box 8500 • Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, K1G 3H9  
Tel: 613-236-6163 • Fax: 613-238-7230 • Email: [info@idrc.ca](mailto:info@idrc.ca)

As research supported by IDRC and the UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States has found, these nationality laws are contrary to these countries' constitutions and to international treaties. The researchers also discovered that most women don't realize the dire consequences that marrying foreigners will have on their families.

Drawing policy and public attention to the serious social and economic impact of this inequity is the goal of this research undertaken by the Gender and Citizenship Initiative of the UNDP's Programme on Governance in the Arab Region. While family and nationality policies are now changing for the better in many countries, "they will continue to remain only symbolic first steps until they materialize into real and functioning laws," says the research report.

<http://gender.pogar.org/>

## MAKING REPARATIONS WORK FOR WOMEN

For countries emerging from conflict, dealing with human rights' abuses of the past and compensating victims is critical to building a "healthy" future.

Research undertaken by the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) and funded by IDRC suggests, however, that massive state-sponsored reparations programs designed for this purpose may fall short of the mark because they fail to take into account the specific needs of women.

"If we don't ask questions about the role that gender plays in experiences of violence and programs for redress, we not only undermine the fundamental goals

of justice that should inspire reparations programs, but we also miss a crucial opportunity to prevent the ongoing suffering of women victims," says Ruth Rubio Marín, ICTJ project manager.

Rubio Marín says this kind of research is crucial in making reparation measures more effective for victims on the margins of otherwise well-intentioned programs.

[www.ictj.org](http://www.ictj.org)

## RETOOLING AFGHANISTAN'S RURAL ECONOMY

Afghanistan's Ministry of Agriculture and Food is piloting the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) to deliver agricultural and marketing information to farmers. Working with the International Crops Research Institute for the Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT) and IDRC, the Afghans are adapting an award-winning "hub and spokes" system perfected in rural India. The Ministry will house a central information hub that acts as a clearinghouse for "spokes" in two Afghan provinces. This new interactive model of rural extension may help restore degraded agricultural systems and increase food security.

[network.idrc.ca/en/ev-67369-201-1-DO\\_TOPIC.html](http://network.idrc.ca/en/ev-67369-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html)



IDRC: Daniel Buckles

## SEEDING RECOVERY IN AFGHANISTAN

When looters in two Afghan cities broke into stores of carefully selected seeds in 2002, they struck a devastating blow to the country's future food security. The seeds were the country's stock-piled agricultural heritage, varieties of traditional crops bred over generations to flourish in local conditions, to suit local tastes.

Ongoing conflict and years of drought made the loss particularly serious. In fact, the International Center for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA) reports that the majority of the nation's seed supply had already been lost. To alleviate the problem, the Future Harvest Consortium to Rebuild Agriculture in Afghanistan was established to supply much needed seed. IDRC supported work on ways to improve the seed aid.

Providing seed aid was an emergency response. The consortium is much more concerned about creating a critical mass of seed so that farmers can produce sufficient food — and seed for future crops. As a first step ICARDA and Afghan researchers, with IDRC support, studied the seed sector in northern Afghanistan, the country's breadbasket. They concluded that while both formal and informal seed systems are important, strengthening the informal seed sector — training communities, farmers, and their networks to multiply and share quality seed of crops and varieties they prefer — holds the greatest promise in the current context. The research highlighted that even in times of crisis and seed aid, more than 92% of farmers' seeds comes from the informal sector. Helping village-based seed enterprises diversify to meet local needs, including those of women who traditionally grow vegetable plots near their homes, would also help communities recover.

[www.icarda.org/Afghanistan/index.html](http://www.icarda.org/Afghanistan/index.html)

### SUBSCRIBE TO THE IDRC BULLETIN

a timely digest of news, features, research updates, and other Centre resources. [www.idrc.ca/idrcbulletin](http://www.idrc.ca/idrcbulletin)