

FOCUS ON GENDER: BRIDGING RESEARCH AND PRACTICE – WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY, PART ONE

Carla Koppell 0:48

Hi, I'm Carla Koppell. I'm a Fellow at the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security and I also teach in the School of Foreign Service. I came to Georgetown a little over two years ago from the US Institute for Peace where I was a Vice President, leading the Center for Applied Conflict Transformation and prior to that was Chief Strategy Officer and Senior Coordinator for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment, with the US Agency for International Development. Though I will add that I met Orzala before all of that. When we were working together around advocating for women's voices in the Afghan peace processes, over a long time so we've, we've been friends and collaborators for many years now.

Orzala Nemat 1:38

Definitely. Thank you, Carla. This is Orzala Nemat. I'm Director of Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit. It's a research think tank focusing on social policy in Afghanistan. Since 2016 I joined AREU as its Director. Before that, I was working briefly for Afghanistan's president, Dr. Ashraf Ghani as his advisor on subnational governance matters and prior to that, I was studying, I've been teaching at School of Oriental and African Studies, SOAS, in the UK. I completed my PhD studies there focusing on how external interventions will shape or will influence local power relations and following that I was teaching classes on conflict and development, development practice and so on. And prior to that, as Carla said, I had the honor and great pleasure of participating, a number of courses at Harvard University, focusing on woman peace and security. This was because of my activism and my role as a woman, leader in Afghanistan focusing from a very grassroots....So basically in terms of my background I can say in my life for a period of past two decades, I would say, I have been a refugee myself. I have been a practitioner in the development, grassroots practitioner in the development field. I have also been a researcher for a long time. And at one point, though briefly, I worked in the government as a policy advisor. And now I'm focusing on. I'm kind of feeling that I am in a right place where I am aiming to basically bridge between some some time and somewhat divided worlds of academia and practice.

Carla Koppell 3:42

I like, I like listening to you when you talk about your career because I think when we're together talking about how to bridge theory and practice, I love the reflection of the two of us who have worked in these various realms. When we first met, you were an activist. I mean you obviously are also still a student to some extent and, and I spent the vast majority of my career as a practitioner, whether in government or outside of government, and only came into academia a couple of years ago. And the reason I came into academia and I'm, I tell this story because I'd love to hear your story. We've never talked about this. Is that I observed over about the same two decades you're talking about that we were as...when we were doing advocacy whether that was in government or outside of government. We were making the same arguments over and over again, and that the, the policymakers and practitioners often were no more aware of all of the compelling research and arguments for more inclusive processes and for women's inclusion than they were 20 years ago, even though the evidence base has gotten stronger and stronger. And I

concluded that the only way we were going to start to see changes in terms of the views of policymakers and practitioners, was to make sure that when we were educating the next generation of leaders, they were getting this information, that they were learning about these topics, and that they were envisioning them as a fundamental piece of the expertise you need to bring to international affairs and foreign policy, and that if they didn't, they came out of school thinking they knew more or less how to approach foreign policy, and yet they had this big blank spot. And so a lot of my focus has now shifted to moving upstream, to bringing the evidence and research that exists into the classroom, ensuring that this next generation knows about the need for women's inclusion and to make sure that we're changing... we're really transforming international affairs education to bring a paradigmatic shift that focuses on inclusion and as one of inclusion in particular. So I'm curious what your observations are on that from your, you're 20 you're 20 years of lived life in parallel to mine.

Orzala Nemat 6:26

Well, Carla I think in some ways I share your, your experience in terms of you know this observation of the distance between the two. I have, I mean my life story on its own can be a separate sort of topic of how things work and how things didn't work in some ways. These days you know there is a social media trend, we are 20s and I see a lot of my generation even male boys in my generation are putting their university, photos, during the time when they were at their 20s. I have not gone to university at that time. Instead I was organizing home based classes for women and girls who were completely deprived of education and being myself a 12th grade graduate, you know I did not have any degree or anything, but just you know at that time the survival for me and my generation and my people was to basically not miss the opportunity to read and write. So, although it looks fancy to you know be at a university and all that at that time it looked like that but we said okay we have to set the challenges. So, I mean one reflection and I go now, not based on my current knowledge and understanding, but based on my understanding and knowledge of the time that when I started my role as in a public life I would say, I always assumed and that really took a very very long time to realize that this was not the case that the suffering of people who are experiencing injustices, is something that the world does not know about. This was kind of the assumption that we were moving so a lot of our lobbying and advocacy was more around "Let's make the world aware of what's happening to us." Let's, I think a lot of my colleagues in the woman's rights of France, our study using the same rhetorics, the same approach, you know let's, you know, inform the world that we are suffering that there are problems on that. And it took me some time but then I realized that actually it's not that the world doesn't know, but the world has to make choices based on the political interest based on the strategic and geopolitical and all kind of economic whatever best of interests. They choose where to look at, where not to. And it's more about us basically, finding the best ways and the best solutions, the disconnect between academia, in realities and practice. I noticed that when I started to get familiar with the literature, literature on peacebuilding, literature on development, even the field that I was living with, you know, for my life for my adult life, most of the time, and I forgot to say when as a recipient, you know when I talk when I reflect to them, during my own PhD research I realized, oh actually maybe there are not many scholars or many people in academia who have also been a recipient of this development practice development aid and assistance. Like a refugee. like when you're a refugee you are basically are, you know, like we were living in the refugee camp where I had to like get my education, if a German NGO was available to provide it. If not, there wasn't anyone else providing it, you know. Despite the fact

that I had, I come from, you know, educated well educated, parents, but my parents were busy with many other responsibilities, they could not educate us. And so this really was something that I felt was quite absent from the literature, the perspectives of the people. So the people generally in academia and maybe now some people who would like me saying that, but the people who maybe are the recipients of interventions, of aid and development, are always seen as, you know, these passive subjects of interventions that may not necessarily have agency or have voice. Of course there is literature literature on agency of people, but they are so one-sided, so it's like agency, or you know, this other side. So this is what really led me to go back to Afghanistan, although I love teaching and I hope to return to teaching one day very soon. But I said, I have to go back to my home country despite all the tremendous challenges there and actually try to contribute bridging this gap. Because another thing that I noticed was okay we have excellently written policies, from if...let's, like, focus on women-related policies, we had National Action Plan for Women, NAPWA, National Action Plan for Women, of Afghanistan.

This NAPWA is, is a very well-written document. So, during this was even like long, long time ago I'm sorry if I go back a little bit back and forth. This is when I just did my Masters in Development and Planning, and I had a course on Gender Policy and Planning at that time. This was back in 2006-2007. So somebody brought the text of the NAPWA which was originally written in English and they wanted to translate it in Dari. So they showed me the folder they brought me in to look at the Dari translation to see if this is making you know, if it's like, communicating the message. So I asked, I said can I have access to the English because I didn't understand any little bit of the Dari, text, you know, it was so complicated and the language was awful. So I say okay, it's not a question of language, let me see the first original version. When I look to that that time I was back to the, the UN agency who was providing this policy and I said, Look, with all due respect, I come from Afghanistan and I have been into the struggle for women's rights, right before the Taliban unit, since I remember. What is written here as an ex...it can pass as an excellent essay in a Gender Policy and Planning course, but not real policy that can change the situation in the country because it's not contextualized. It's written by an excellent scholar, excellent you know policy expert who may not have, you know, the real knowledge of the gender issues, and gender relations in the country. And I'm not trying to sort of make Afghanistan's gender relation data unique from any other parts of the world, of course, everyone is a human being. Afghan men and women are also the same human beings as everyone else. But there has been a socio-political, socio-economic realities that form the gender relations in the country. And I found that part quite, sort of absent in these policies, in in this is why, sort of, I got more motivated to look at, you know, ethnography of policies and programs, how they are formed, who is taking part in the initial design of these, sort of, you know, policies and programs really figure out, of course, if there's, I don't have any answer, we don't have any answers but to figure out what really results into something and then what works and what doesn't work. So colleagues, excellent, to have this conversation with you and especially to look at, if you could also sort of give an example of like for example in your experiences of working with, with the aid for example, USAID, how people within the institution we're looking into policymaking. What were the challenges from your side because from my side it's there.

Carla Koppell 14:34

So I think it's really your observation is a really interesting one Orzala, because I think there are there are multiple levels of disconnect, or gaps to fill. You're talking about sort of the connection

from the, the aid community or donors writ large, to people on the ground and that authentic voice and then I think there's this other dimension which is the connection between the people who are doing the sort of more academic research and whether or not that ever even makes it tight to the donor community or to the people on the ground, or to anybody who's implementing program and policy. I would. I'll turn to USAID in a second because I think there are some important observations there. But I would say there are, you said early on in your comments that you know the policymakers don't prioritize and and that it's more from a prioritization than knowledge, but I think it's a combined issue because when I look at the academic Institutes now, the...when you're teaching particularly younger students, although not totally younger students, they, they really lack basic information. I mean I was just talking with a group of people in a class that didn't even have a sense of the whole creation of the human rights architecture within the UN in the post-war period. These are people dedicated to international affairs who had self-selected into a class related to inclusion and inequities, so these weren't people who didn't care. It was simply that they weren't learning anything about it and so I do think sometimes there are gaps in knowledge certainly with regard to the basic fundamentals of the human rights architecture and laws and obligations, at least, perhaps that's more true of us, not sure but certainly it's the case. I think the other issue is you were talking about, where they make priorities, but I think the priorities, in part, are born of how you're educated about what matters and what doesn't matter. And so, questioning the fact that the well being of populations is a lower priority than the development of weapons of mass destruction or worrying about only armed non-state actors, as opposed to unarmed nonviolent civil society movements and how you prioritize among them. And someone it's born of the biases in the way we educate those professionals, as with regard to what matters and then they come out and they either fall in line with the priorities as identified by an earlier generation commonly academics or they question that but questioning it takes time and it takes a willingness to speak truth to power, to question the assumptions of people who are often superiors and supervisors. So I think there are a set of embedded challenges in there. With regard to USAID, I mean, I think there...so there are multiple challenges. Within the context of Afghanistan, specifically, when I went to Afghanistan and I was working for USAID, I was struck by the fact that there was such severe limitations on the ability of the staff to go out and meet with and talk to people on the ground, that even the most willing, positively engaged AID employee had real difficulty, having conversations and connecting with with local experts. And hopefully now that we're all very used to video conferencing, that can be overcome. Much more expensive then, than it was in the past, but it's a very very severe problem. I also or, challenge is probably a better word. I also think that there is insufficient awareness of the incredible expertise that exists in local populations around all around the world, and you're very modest. But you're not just a leader in Afghanistan, but a global leader who should be at the forefront of conversations around, not just Afghanistan but women's inclusion writ large. And that we're not calling on people, that we're not even aware of the women leaders who are out there doing this work whether that is within, within donor relations, or whether that is folks in academia, who are working on these issues but they're working on it quite removed from the practitioners on the ground, is a challenge and we need the onus on all of us to help identify and bring forward these authentic voices, so that they are influencing both research and practice around the world. I think that, while things are improving as a very long road to travel to really make the development of programs, for assistance in development and conflict resolution partnerships between people on the ground and and people from the countries that are, in theory, receiving and receiving assistance. And, and the people

who are working abroad, whether that's within an academic setting or whether that's in a, in a practitioner setting. I, you know, I I'm curious I, from your perspective, I'd seen a lot of very basic barriers to moving between the academic and practitioner communities. Things like, when I was at US Institute for Peace. And we were putting out publications, we didn't even, even though they were peer-reviewed publications, they were not even put into the academic databases like J-STOR and others that the academic community uses as a primary source of information. And so practitioner organizations, even when they were doing research that rose to the level of academic research, weren't crossing that bridge and similarly now that I'm in academia, I see that the academics, often are only looking to peer-reviewed journals because that's what gets them tenure and promotion. They are, you know, focused on bringing in academic materials and I'm curious how you within AREU or when you were teaching at SOAS. We're trying to bridge those divides because I think it's, it's not necessarily so easy, or so natural.

Orzala Nemat 21:18

Well, definitely. I think in terms of accessibility I think this is one of the most significant challenges. If I sort of bring back my own experiences of Master's and PhD in search time from Afghanistan from a vast majority of you know organizations and institutions publishing reports and everything. The only two resources that I could use was my current organization, AREU, because they were peer-reviewed papers, and maybe one or two more USIP, Afghan analysts to, to a level. More details, once they were referenceable, but not all the NGO, consultancy-based, you know, reports and papers, and we have used it's. I mean I have extremely flexible University rules in this particular topic of, multi disciplinary topic like theme like development, but I know from my other colleagues and friends that it was almost not possible, because like you said. What was measurable in terms of success and points was journal articles, behind the paywallsm behind the limitations. So, policymakers, on the other side, when when we sort of insist that policymakers to use academic resources they say okay very well. Show me how I can access them. So you have to be affiliated with a University to have access, and otherwise. So we we have at AREU, I think there's some creativity, I think is there in the AREU where, I mean, in terms of variety of publications that we have used, we've tried to sort of address this. For example, on one thing that we became quite well respected globally I think even, but also specifically on Afghanistan, is to really be more sort of creative in terms of our methodologies, of using, you know, innovative methodologies where, you know, for example satellite imagery are used with the qualitative, you know, interviews from the ground and surveys and all of that. And then stick in terms of, you know, in terms of methodology, to stick to the sort of academic principles. Of course ethics is another one. Quite, quite strict on ethics issues as well. When it comes to...then see how that could be relevant to policy. In the policy world, they don't have time. I don't know about other countries but to the extent I know, and policymakers don't have time to go through and read like whole 125 pages of, you know, synthesis paper or 50 even pages of issues paper. These are a variety of papers. So, what we thought was most useful, one, was to have always a briefing paper, a shorter version of the whole paper, which is based on the detailed paper. That's also important. You never have briefing papers that are not connected to your larger studies, and then try to communicate those briefing papers and presentations with the key policymakers. This was one side of you know, making good use...making the research, the research that uses social science methods, make that useful to the people in the policy and practice. The second thing that we found also very useful in terms of our approaches, I think, is focusing on different layers of people in policy programs, both government and academia and

NGOs, because in Afghanistan NGOs also play an important role in the development field. So, we did this by bringing the technical expertise from these different institutions, I mean, the mid-level, which to me, based on experience I had with the actual drivers of the state or process machinery are these mid-level technical people, especially in the government because top people are always political appointees and these political appointees, do not necessarily have the necessary...the expertise. They are politically appointed because of their patronage relations or whatever. But the mid-level, which are directors, sometimes deputies, but mostly directors of different departments, they when they are part of research throughout, the process. From the design and formulation of the research, to the actual initial finding validation process. And then, development of recommendations, because as a social policy research organization at AREU, I always push my officers, my colleagues, who were publishing and say, don't forget the so what question because excellent research but this is not for your journal it's actually for AREU, so you always have to have the question, what are the implications of, policy implications of your study? If the study doesn't have a policy implication, the AREU is not the platform for it because we are committed to that. So, then the the sort of the recommendation parts of our research at AREU is generally the section that is not a prescription list of the author of him or herself. It's something that comes through a very rigorous process of consultation, validations, and then making sure that these are also, you know, smart enough in the sense of being specific and measurable and so on. And in that way we are...I would not say completely, but relatively able to measure the impact of our research, because in a policy organization when you do research...you will be judged based on the quality I mean, our donor, we have donors who are not really that much worried about. We really, we have donors who are not worried about quality, obviously everyone who across the AREU, they are approaching us because of the quality. But in this quality is defined by some people in terms of, you know, are we using the referencing system properly, do we have a clear methodology or are these are all very academic criterias. Whereas the other side says okay sometimes it's a time matter, bring us something in like two months or three months because they need an assessment, they need something. The other side is whether there is an impact as a result, so how to measure that impact is important. So we sort of gradually throughout the course of history in the last 18 years or so, we've sort of managed to develop this process in a way that...

In a way that we are not only making the academic criteria. We definitely will have to, in terms of quality. We also make our work as much relevant as possible. When it comes to basically be owned by those in program design and policy formulation. Now, we go back to the question of how effective that is or not, in terms of programs, I mean, that also in the Social and Political Sciences is something that the whole like they say the elephant in the room here is not necessarily the techniques that we are using, it's political the politics of this whole process, I think, sometimes. At least I myself with my research, have been a quite strong advocate of, not necessarily politicizing but acknowledging the fact that politics does play a very important role. When I say politics. I mean, politics within the country and due to the socio-political or the political economy, basically, more than socio-political, the political economy, sort of realities of the country. What are the vested interests of certain actors, individuals, institutions, the same way, and the relation between the local and national level country, international partners, so that politics also results in...in these processes being effective or not.

Carla Koppell 30:30

That's really interesting. I was thinking as you were talking about how we approach it at Georgetown because of course the Institute has been predominantly focused on a practitioner community, but of late, we've done more to try to bifurcate our work to reach more of an academic community even as we're speaking to practitioners and policymakers. So, for example, we now are, we've always done some publishing in academic journals, etc. but now I think we've, to some extent, increased the emphasis on doing that, as well as putting out our own reports. We try to do use a dissemination strategy that reaches a wider audience base and last, last summer we hosted actually a conference on bridging theory and practices. This very top level, around diversity and inclusion issues and the thing that was interesting in this conversation is, there's actually a project that is...intent is oriented towards academics to try to get them to be more focused on the practitioner community and talking about things like, you know, you can talk about your research in "The Monkey Cage" or "War on the Rocks" blogs that feature academic authors, turning their material into material for more of a practitioner community. One interesting point that came out in the conversation that we had at this conference was a former dean who said, you know, one vehicle for bringing more of the practitioner work upstream into the academic community is to use more adjunct professors who come out of the practitioner universe. They will be citing different forms of material they and we shouldn't fear them bringing in practitioner documentation. Often academics say, well, the adjuncts aren't bringing the same kind of material and they shouldn't be. We should be using them to bring a different kind of material into the classroom, but I'm curious. I'm curious. It was pointed out that there is a large share of academics who aren't all that interested in reaching practitioners. Now they're doing research for the sake of research and they're interested in a phenomenon, or a certain analysis of a certain data set, and they don't necessarily care about its application or the broader implications. Do you, when you were talking to the folks at AREU and saying, you know, how is this relevant or what is the takeaway from this or how does it matter, or when you were working on your PhD or with colleagues at SOAS, did you, did you find that there was an interest in reaching policymakers and practitioners or what, what share of the people who were doing academic quality research, were really interested in bridging this gap?

Orzala Nemat 33:35

Probably will be very much depending from one person to another, from one institution to another. At SOAS when I was teaching, I was teaching one of the classes I love teaching actually more than me probably my students loved me teaching that, was the development practice. And this is like part of the undergraduate program of studies, each student was expected to do a development practice. So I entered the classroom and I said, Look guys, I come with a very wealth of experience in terms of practice okay I'm a PhD student here of course at that time I was still a student. I said I'm not going to take you to all the theories. Do your theory classes elsewhere, in another course, in another class. In my class we just, I bring you to the field, really, because like you said earlier, I think the students majority of my students were just you know like they came from high school. They were like, B.A. students with almost no experience of the field. So it was quite interesting for them to find themselves in a room where they will actually...Oh like, like I said What brought you to study development studies and not to media or politics or diplomacy or some other field? You probably have a view in your mind. A vision. So like, let me just take your vision and push it a little bit farther to reality. So I noticed in this process that there was a serious sort of gap in terms of providing those practical, action-oriented activities in a different... different schools took different approaches. In my case, when I did my

master's degree, we were taken all the way to Tanzania, to Arusha for field research, you know because that was how the school, and this was UCL at the time. This was the vision that okay the students should go completely to a place where it is feasible to do a field research, and they have to actually do an actual assignment. And the experience was incredible. My first and so far, unfortunately last ever experience, traveling to the continent of Africa, but at the same time every single bit of what I learned in that course has guided me throughout my life. Because it was, we were focusing on three children in Arusha city, that project was a small tiny project of course and what can you do in 10 days? It's not an actual research, but it was a practice. So, I think a desirable situation could be, you know, having more practice oriented activities for our students in the social sciences, generally but specifically in the issues of public policy or development studies. The appetite among the academia, depends on the background of academic individuals. If they themselves come from backgrounds that they have worked in an NGO they have worked with you and they have worked somewhere and they are willing to sort of be open about the experiences they are bringing. And sometimes it's although outdated. Probably somebody who has been in the NGO world in the 1980s cannot really have an understanding of 2000 or, you know that 2010, 2020. Now, we are having a whole new sets they're changing. And so sometimes I sort of felt and observed that this is also a thing. That it's only the practical experience of that certain, you know, university scholar, is what matters to them throughout their teaching. And I mean, this is an a very best scenario, because in my own country if I if I start about how the teaching methods are there, it's completely like heartbreaking. Because once, just to give you an example of, an extreme example of it it's...I met this respected university professor in in Kabul once and with a very high proud, he was like, I wrote my thesis in 1984 on this topic. He mentioned the topic and then I say Oh, excellent. So he says, I'm still teaching my thesis to my students and I was like, whoa. For many years, but number one I have to spend like two weeks on the curriculum development and making sure to update. Everything sometimes even two weeks, three weeks or a month. And yet there are some people around the world who are still like teaching their thesis to people. So I think that side is there. The other one, when it comes to specifically women, peace and security. We do have institutions we do have smaller organizations trying to make activities and all that and I think, again, this whole sort of question of woman's role in peace and security. Sometimes it is a kind of topic that is felt to be, Oh it's not research-related, it's just, you know, for the sake of, you know, like urgency, we have to push immediately, we have to put a woman around the table and all that. It's here I specifically think of the Afghan peace process and woman's role. We have always emphasized at AREU that Okay fine, it's important to bring women on around the table. But what is the message that these women will give? What is the evidence that they will have to use? And the content of the discussions is also very important. So I think there is huge room still for for research, and more. Practitioners oriented research activities that we hope to sort of see in the future.

Carla Koppell 39:47

Talking about experiential learning is super important and I know we're out of time but the one thing I would mention and we didn't focus on but I think it's important to just touch on it is, we also have to enable classes and programs to get beyond those who already interested in issues of Women, Peace and Security to the mainstream. Because too often we are starting to talk about these issues but it's really among a select group of people that are dedicated to this agenda and really it needs to be something that touches everybody. If we're gonna have women included in these processes, if we're gonna have this reflected within an academic environment, and if we're

gonna have it realized within the practitioner environment, then everybody needs to know about it. Everybody needs to accept it as important. And that includes people for whom it doesn't offer advantages so you know no two women, not the people who are privileged, all the people who are out there, who believe that peace and security are important, need to be convinced that this is an essential part of creating a durable peace. So I think we have a lot of work to do.

Orzala Nemat 1:24

Absolutely.

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