

Clara Reglero arrived in Afghanistan in February 2010 and she remained there until August 2013, specifically in the capital of the province of Badghis, Qala-e-Naw, a small rural town in which the Spanish troops had set up and where the work of the Spanish Cooperation Agency (AECID) was being developed, in collaboration with Tragsa.

The Spanish team from our company was made up of a Chief Operations Officer and a coordinator for each of the programmes: Health, Agriculture, Water and Sanitation, Infrastructures and Machinery Park, and the Gender Programme, whose coordination Clara was in charge of.



T9. *How did you find the social perspective on gender when you started on the project? Was the reality what you were expecting?*

C.R. The things you read about Afghanistan, especially in terms of gender, are so atrocious that, to be honest, I was pleasantly surprised. I thought I would find fearful and timid women. Instead I also found powerful women, with the strength to stand up and speak about their problems, with a sense of humour and the ability to laugh at their misfortunes, at their men...However, there are heavily ingrained gender roles that ensure order within the community. There is a heavy social control in place to maintain the norm. The unusual is considered a threat and it is hard to get things to change, it's almost as if it's easier to change for the worst than for the better. For example, they told me that years ago there had never been problems in sending girls to school, and then all that changed. Nowadays it seems difficult to make any progress, as though fear prevails in the communities.

Men have their place on the public stage, whilst the role women play is limited to domestic chores. He must protect

and control the women, who are representatives and guarantors of the prestige and honour of the family. That requires a lot of responsibility, because honour and family are core values. There is a lot of pressure on women to move in with their husband's family after they marry so that the family honour is not questioned by the community. In general, the interests of the group prevail over individual interests. Age is also a factor. Women earn respect with age.

However, it is true that things can change little by little. For example, when we arrived a woman who worked outside the house was perceived badly. We had great difficulties finding beneficiaries for our projects. Women were looked down upon for fraternising with foreigners or infidels, but that soon changed, so much so that during the last years of the project we were inundated with applications.

Those severely ingrained roles seemed savage to me when I first arrived. It was as if they knew the role they had to play and they wouldn't move from that position. I was shocked by the fact that, no matter how small the project we introduced, we

always had to employ someone to make the tea and sometimes even to clean the area assigned to the project. Over there, if you're employed as a teacher or as a technician it is seen as an insult if you make the tea, or carry out a task that corresponds to another level or another person. Also, because the public domain is the man's territory and the house the woman's, there is an imbalance in power and a need for women's representation in institutions.

I was also surprised to see how each culture justifies these imbalances, and changes the perspective and interpretation. For example, I thought that the use of the burkha, which so horrifies us in the West, would be a burden and a reason for women to voice their demands, but it wasn't like that at all. In the city we were in, the burkha was used completely naturally. It was accepted and justified, even by the most courageous women in voicing their rights. If we were to compare it to our society, it would be like someone from another country looking at us and thinking: what a nightmare! those poor women having to wear jeans or make-up to work! Another thing I found interesting is that in a place where women have to hide their faces for safety, they have no qualms in lifting their

burkhas, and baring their breasts to feed their babies, even in front of men. They all see it as perfectly normal, showing full respect for maternity.

They also justified how women could hardly ever leave the house, and if they did it was always accompanied, by arguing that women are so appreciated and important for the family that they must be protected in that way.

Despite all of this, I have to say that we can't generalise, because Afghan society is incredibly complex and has a social system riddled with unwritten rules, with many differences in terms of what can and can't be done, depending on ethnicity and territory.

T9. *What are the daily problems Afghan women face?*

C.R. The limited access to education and health services, and the lack of freedom of movement. They are imprisoned in their own homes and can only leave if accompanied. That isolation means they have less of a capacity to transform the communities. It is important to highlight the early forced marriages, linked to extreme poverty. In most cases these are the reasons for arranged marriages because they are very often the only opportunity the family has to earn an income.

Women are the victims of insecurity and armed conflict. They suffer rape or honour killings to tarnish the prestige of the enemy family, or they act as a bargaining chip, serving prison sentences for crimes committed by a family member. They also experience a considerable lack of access to the justice system. And to all of this we must add the usual problems of the community: the lack of access to fresh water and suitable health services, misery, etc.

T9. *What is the current situation over there? Is it tradition or religion that takes precedence?*

C.R. Tradition, without a shadow of a doubt. There is heavy social control based on it. Nothing can step outside the rules, beyond tradition. In the communities, everyone behaves as defined by the elders or their religious leaders, the mullahs, who base their theories on tradition passed on from generation to generation, customs, or their own interpretation.

T9. *What are the biggest legal hurdles you had to face when trying to bring equality between men and women?*

C.R. In spite of its downfalls, there is a legal framework that protects women, starting with the Constitution and the Civil Code. There is also a Law for the Elimination of Violence

Against Women. However, it is true that there are a lot of new laws and women have little access to the justice system, so the laws are not always upheld or enforced. Primarily due to a lack of knowledge. It is shameful to see how the Provincial Justice Department itself was unaware of the laws. In fact, many of the awareness-raising activities within our programme were aimed as informing about the laws, taking into account in particular the law against gender violence and bringing it to the attention of magistrates themselves.

T9. *Do you think Afghan men agree with the code of conduct applied to women, or do social pressures and standards prevail?*

C.R. The fact that there are such defined roles has a negative impact on men as well, because they suffer the pressure of having to be what a man is expected to be. At the end of the day, the individual has little room for manoeuvre. Things are done as a group. You could be against your wife wearing a burkha, for example, but your family and the community will convince you to not question whether she should chose to wear it or not, instead they will ensure you force her to do so. Social convention is heavy.

I was often surprised to hear that it was the mother-in-law who had to pressure her son to be more strict with his wife and mark his territory using violence, or even that it was the mother-in-law herself using violence against her daughter-in-law.

T9. *What specific measures did your gender plan try to introduce? What were its main objectives?*

C.R. Our projects revolved around three aspects.

The first, raising awareness in terms of gender. To that end we provided training activities, workshops or events aimed at public officials, local leaders, Mullahs, teachers and communities in general. They covered topics such as violence against women and the law, early marriage, rights, etc. The aim was to implement the National Gender Strategy in the province in which all the different departments were to collaborate. There was also a daily radio programme, and a monthly magazine, and we worked closely with the Mullahs, training them so that they could spread the message about women's rights during their Friday sermons. In addition, we also attempted to strengthen the technical and operational capacity of the Provincial Department of Women's Affairs so that it could continue

to be operational even after the donors had left.

Another essential aspect of our work was aimed at promoting and diversifying sustainable production activities for women. Support was given to the carpet weaver's cooperative; silk pashmina spinning courses were offered; a poultry farm was created so that women could breed hens or use the incubators to breed hens, and vegetable patches were introduced in



women's homes or communal land. Those projects aimed to provide the tools the participants needed to earn an income. For all of them, supplementary group training was provided, which encouraged the women to meet.

Another strong pillar in our plan was to afford support to the representation of women in communities and institutions, with the management of a Women's Centre in one of the districts, support courses for girls' access for to University and literacy courses, among other activities.

T9. *Was the project well received within the framework of the other actions implemented by Tragsa Group? What were the obstacles you had to overcome, if any, in the development of the project?*

C.R. To be honest, the projects and everything that involved the gender programme had some peculiarities that made them very different to the remainder of the programmes. Firstly, the fact that they were quite abstract projects, because they primarily involved awareness-raising activities. Also, when working with the women we had to be very careful not to offend anybody, and that implied some constraints. Our mobility was reduced

and we needed military bodyguards to leave the base where we lived, and so we always had to take into account sensitive variables to get the work done. We could be given suspicious looks just for being foreign. That is why, on occasion I had difficulty trying to get these particularities across to the team.

At a local level, the initiatives were well received, slowly generating trust. But we had to first win over the Afghan team, then the different local departments and after that the communities, making sure they saw that we were respectful of their culture, that we weren't trying to impose our criteria and that we had valuable contributions to make.

T9. *Can you tell us what were, in your opinion, the greatest achievements?*

C.R. Involving the influential Mullahs, who agreed to come and receive training and participate in awareness-raising activities, is something I think was key. Going from being suspicious foreigners to generating trust and getting the women to work on our projects, with the support of the community and the government departments, have been some of the main achievements of our time in Afghanistan.

In terms of numbers, more than one thousand women were able to create vegetable patches or breed hens in their homes, generating income and improving the food supply and health of their families. We were also able to develop new initiatives in the area, such as building greenhouses or transforming foodstuffs in order to have access to them throughout the year; or adapting market tastes, such as planting parsley, which was very expensive and always came from out of town; monitoring those cases of violation of women's rights and mediating between the two parties; or training women through literacy courses...In conclusion, we collaborated to ensure that women were seen as a source of community value.

T9. *Having developed the gender programme, do you think it is really possible to impose our perception of human and women's rights on other cultures and religious regimes?*

C.R. At no point did our programme attempt to impose our Western perceptions on the country. In fact, that is why there was always coordination work and discussions with the Afghan team on the activities that were carried out and on how they should be addressed. We were guided by the

law and by the National Gender Strategy, always counting on the opinion and approval of the Provincial Department for Women's Affairs, which was involved in all the projects.

T9. *Looking back, what actions would you have liked to have implemented but were unable to? What would you change about the experience?*

C.R. Perhaps it would've been more interesting to consider a more transversal gender programme, which we contemplated at one point because there was an overlap between the things we were doing and other programmes. But due to budgetary and time constraints, and the inertia of work, it was decided to keep to a specific Gender Programme.

There were many projects that stayed on the back burner. For example, we didn't have time to finish some of the proposals we had planned for promoting leadership among young women. In general, we lacked time and experience. The awareness-raising activities need a lot of time for their messages to penetrate and I think we reached an interesting point, but we would've needed to carry on insisting for a number of years and generations. I hope

they have continued with the task and I imagine that in the near future we will be able to assess whether any of it has sunk in and stuck.

T9. *From all the experiences you lived through, what most impacted your stay?*

C.R. Well there were a lot of things and it would take too long to tell you about

them all, but I think the ones that most impacted me were those relating to security, which made me realise how complicated and difficult life is there and what the Afghans have to face every day. I also learnt that we were operating on delicate land, where what takes a long time to be built can be destroyed in a second by radicalism and violence.

