Women's exclusion was never more visible than under the Taliban, whose defeat made it possible to do away with the veil. But does progress extend to a real say in the life of the nation? And is the international community doing enough for the disadvantaged majority?

Women not Warlords

Events in Afghanistan have a way of changing the world – it has played an unfortunate but vital role in creating a new political landscape. In Afghanistan, the destruction of the Taliban regime has led to the establishment of a new government. The new government faces a number of challenges, including ensuring the rights of women are protected.

Respect

Does the political process and planning for reconstruction go far enough to deliver real gains for women? And how much will outside powers do to support them? President George Bush included support for women in his formula for defeating the scourge of war. This fall, as part of the equality required by international law that it sounds closer to fundamentalist Islam.

Certainly, the political process and donor pledges go further than previous post-conflict missions in providing for women's rights and needs. There is also greater commitment to monitoring expenditure for its relative impact on women and men. On paper, the December Bonn Agreement, which set the framework for the political process, makes it tougher than most such tests for female participation in government and state building.

Afghan women must be given real, equitable influence, especially as they form an estimated sixty percent of the population. Ownership of the reconstruction process by the people is part of the US and international agenda. It is of critical importance which part of the nation takes ownership. Women, ordinary people and civil society do not want weak hands to run the show. They need appropriate, purposeful and maybe politically uncomfortable support if they are to have real say.

Machismo

The process of restoring government should at least match, and preferably exceed, precedents set in other post-conflict operations.