THIRD SPACE THOUGHTS TO POLICY – IIIT's AEMS Podcast
Transcript for Episode 8: The Value of Grassroots Engagement and the Role of Women
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Host: Amina Derbi   Guest: Afeefa Syeed

Amina: Welcome everyone. You are listening to Third Space Thoughts to Policy, the official podcast of AEMS-PC, the Advancing Education in Muslim Societies Policy Center, an education policy think tank at IIIT, the International Institute of Islamic Thought. The purpose of our podcast (Third Space Thoughts to Policy) is to hear from experts and stakeholders in the field of education policy reform including policy advisors, governmental officials, academics, teachers, and parents. If you're interested in joining the conversation so we can work towards progress and understanding together, please visit our website at iiit.org, and follow us on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. You can listen to our podcast on Stitcher, Spotify, iTunes, or Apple Podcasts, Messy.FM, Google Play or Podcast Mirror. If you like listening to the content you hear, please subscribe and leave a review at the end. That helps other listeners tune in as well.

This is the second half of our interview with Afeefa Syeed. If you haven't listened to the first half yet, you can do so in Episode 7.

[transition]

Amina: You focus heavily on women in your work; what role do women have in community-based educational systems?

Afeefa: Well I think in terms of speaking about women and women's participation, both with the NGO and non-profit sector and education in particular, we sort of have to think what are we looking at. So a lot of times people say, "Where are the women?" And we have to empower women and give them the podium for example or give them some visibility. Which is extremely fair and very much needed, because many times women are regulated to the background noise or background aspect of work. But at the same time, I think what we sometimes start when we talk about women's participation is start with the negative and saying women aren't involved. What I'd like to do is flip it a little bit, especially my international development work, and think about what is working, and where are the women actually already making those changes or affecting change first? Let's dig a little deeper. That isn't to say or to acknowledge that women are misrepresented or underrepresented, I'd like to think that things are happening, where are they happening?

An example I'd like to give is in Afghanistan, we were working on girls' education and thinking through, well girls, we know they're being stymied, they're not allowed to come to school. So that was the big deal, but at the same time, we started to ask the question about well, where are some of them getting some education, what is happening, and we found in an excited way, that women were teaching girls in basements of homes, or they were in quiet small little study circles. It was happening, but in a very low-key and entirely under-the-radar kind of space, which means they didn't want to bring attention to that because obviously the consequences would be that it would be shut down. But also to say that their role as women, and in this case girls as well, was such that they understood that "we're not going to be able to do it in the same way that everybody wants it to happen but we're going to be doing it in our own way." So to understand that though that happens, and that we can sort of pursue that understanding of where are things not happening not on our

radar or not on our terms (a lot of times we want to see a school building filled with schoolchildren because we think that's going to show that there is education happening). Sometimes education happens under the trees, in a faraway place, or in a quiet room somewhere else and so on and so forth. So we have to start thinking about counting those as authentic experiences as well.

It's difficult because I come from the international development background where we look at development goals. Development goals means you have to see this many people in school and this quota of women or girls being educated. So it is important to think through, and again as an anthropologist for myself, to think through well what're the spaces we're not looking at and where are the rooms where people are not literally physically inside of, but something is happening anyway. So that's one aspect of the work I'm interested in doing and have done, is locating those spaces. In terms of women's education and the role they play, it's also looking at women's leadership.

I work a lot with women of faith leaders and we do leadership training for them from a faith perspective. We go around defining what does that mean. Leader doesn't necessarily mean somebody that is visible, it can be somebody like a teacher that takes the backseat and is not in the forefront, and is doing a lot of work in that way, with girls and so on. So, we do look at it, in the case of Muslims, how is the faith itself inspiring women and what are the tools it's giving for women to do that leadership, and what does that mean for women carrying that through to the girls themselves? You'll find many women who say "I'm a leader but I don't like to be called that. It's too arrogant to call me that." So we think through, we have all these women who are in those leadership positions or spaces not wanting to be called that, not wanting to be designated as that, but doing that work anyway. We ourselves understand from them well what is it that motivates you to be in those positions of leadership even though you don't want to call it that, but you are effecting change. What is it that's effecting you to do that? It's been really interesting to find that out as well.

Amina: Yeah, I'll bet. So our last question for you today is what is the significance of grassroots work in relation to human development?

Afeefa: Well again, it's connected to the civil society conversation we were talking about. I think what's fascinating about this time we're in, is grassroots, meaning very community-based and I call it organic, because it's happening on a level of again off-the-radar in some cases, but it's happening in such a way that you've got schools, NGOs, or others looking at spaces they can affect change, and grassroots, in my mind and my experience is kind of being able to change what you can change. That could be just a school or a handful of schools, and making that sustainable, and making it community-owned, community-led. All of that is happening. It doesn't mean that it can be replicable, which is a concern many people have at a higher level; they want to see something to be scaled so we can have a hundred schools doing this at the same time, or it can be replicated, so we can take this model and put it somewhere else. But really what's happening with grassroots community-based efforts is that it is just that. It is having an effect where it's having an effect. I do think very clearly that people can come and learn from that, from another context, and then go back and play with it a little bit and make it their own. So there is some level of replicability but it's not that cookie-cutter kind of thing.

The exciting thing about the community-based stuff is that more and more people are taking ownership of that space and saying that "you know what, I am a part of the community, and I can effect change and let me see what I can do, and bringing their expertise to that space. And I really hope that's – when we talk about the human development piece and I was talking about place space

– I really think the more we can nudge and getting people to understand that effecting change where you are is far more significant and important than trying to change the world, which can be very frustrating and also not very effective in terms of impact, but just do that – go back to where you are and see what you can affect from there. Do it little by little and build alliances with others that are doing that work, etc., and I do think that's happening, far more than it used to. We were much more dependent as communities on outside resources, outside expertise, outside, come and tell us what we need, whereas now, it's more, we do know what we need, we do understand what we need to do, and we have expertise within our communities! So to build off of that, I'm saying it happens more and more, whether it's in the developing world, communities themselves, or even here in the US, you've got small towns or small communities doing the same thing. I think it's a function of people going into different fields that are necessary but also about people taking ownership, saying "yeah we can do this, we can handle this. Let's find out where we have a gap, where we need help, and get that help for just that component." I'm hoping that's also how the other side of grassroots, which is international development and that kind of imposed development side of things, I'm hoping this will trickle up actually.

Some of my work has been that, which is to go into policy and donor side of development and say that grassroots isn't just a cute thing, it's not a quaint idea "doing such a nice little job on their little project"; it actually is a way of looking at development and looking at grassroots efforts which is to say let's see what they need, let's ask them what they need very specifically, and let's instead bolster what they're doing which is working. And for the most part, most things in communities are working, they're not broken. We're always looking for a problem, for something to fix, whether it's from the outside or even the inside, and we kind of don't understand that there is so much happening that is positive and good that we can build off of and we say "well nothing is working and it's kind of broken," and that be kind of a status of how we see ourselves and our communities. I think that's shifting. I do think that's how we can also put that into education; how we teach young people about their lives and about their world in a more positive way, but also give them the tools. Say "when you see a problem, here's how you can fix it, and when you see something positive happening, here's how you can build off of it" and make that something they can about on a daily basis as well.

Amina: I'm really glad you mentioned that. It's definitely very important when looking at problems to identify what is going wrong, to also what is happening correctly, what's going right, and like you said, it's much more effective and efficient to build off of what's going right, than trying to reinvent the wheel.

Afeefa: Yeah, it's funny – a lot of times when you go to a community and ask them what's right, they don't know how to answer it, because they're so used to responding to "hey what's your problem?" Oh I know what my problem is! They have a whole list in their pocket. I think, as kind of human nature, when you're ready to talk about your problems or get help for your problems, then to spend some time thinking about what's positive. For people of faith, that comes from faith, from this connection to God, which says look at what you're thankful for, but use it as a tool. We have this positive stuff happening here, even if it's one little thing. I was working in the slums in Karachi, outside of Karachi. One of the campaigns was we had to get students to go to school; because this community doesn't value education. That was the whole campaign from the international development side. So we went in, got everyone together, there were some elders, some imams, some teachers and parents, and we sat in the room. Everyone wanted to ask them why don't you send your kids to school? I kind of flipped it and asked if they could tell me what's right, what's working

in the community? And they all kind of looked at each other, they all looked at me, and my colleagues said "what're you saying? This is the slum, this is a horrible situation." I said, "Just tell me what's good!" And it was pretty amazing, after a little while, after a pause, one man stood up and said, "well, we take care of each other." Another person said no one goes hungry. Another one said everybody has a roof over their heads. So we were writing it down, just like we would any kind of community meeting. We wrote all of this positive stuff down. And then somebody said "there's this one thing that is bothering me." It was an imam that actually stood up and said that, and we said what's that? And he said, "not enough of our children go to school." Which was what we had thought to start with, but this was after a whole bunch of talking about what was positive. I said "oh why is that?" Somebody else said that they don't go to school because they don't have shoes, they don't have shoes and they get sick a lot, and they get sick because there's raw sewage outside and they walk in the sewage. And so what we heard from that, was that healthcare was an issue, sanitation and services is an issue, because they have raw sewage around, but we didn't hear anything about "we don't appreciate education" or "we don't like school."

Amina: Right, that wasn't the attitude.

Afeefa: At all, but also, we got to why the kids weren't in school! For very practical reasons. From that you can go back and create policies and create programs, create whatever, but you started somewhere with this community, and it wasn't in any way to be condescending to they want somebody to coddle them. It really came from them.

Amina: Which I'm sure is very empowering.

Afeefa: Exactly! We have them feel ownership of the process as well as the end of it. How do we build on that? And the fact that they feel some positivity about where they are, which they do, it's not like we suddenly opened their eyes for them, they already felt that. They didn't feel like that was ever a part of the conversation they were having from the folks that they felt were trying to come and solve their problems, because they always had a list of the problems. And the other part of that example for me is that we were also coming in with preconceived notions; that they didn't want education because culturally they didn't appreciate education, etc. etc. That wasn't even the reality. But if we were campaigning for that, we'd have posters everywhere saying "education is great, send your kids to school." But it wouldn't make a difference.

Amina: No, that wouldn't be helpful to the local population at all.

Afeefa: Exactly, and again it would show how out-of-touch we are. And then imposing something on the community that doesn't actually necessarily exist. And again, I don't want to simplify things too much, and saying it's that easy. But at the same time, when we talk about grassroots, when we talk about human development as a holistic approach, and we talk about education as what it looks like on the ground, I think you have to connect those dots together. Sometimes it's more work than we want to do. I've had people say to me that we don't have time to have these long conversations with the communities; we just need to go in and do the program. I know that, even from a funder side. But part of the conversation is that if you want something impactful and long-term, and you want the community to understand and appreciate it, it is going to take time and it is part of relationship-building.

Amina: Well thank you very much for joining us today. We were so fortunate and lucky that we were able to sit down and talk with you. We look forward to staying up-to-date on all the work you do. Thank you again!

Afeefa: Thank you Amina! I appreciate being here with you!

Amina: As mentioned last time, American University's International Training and Education Program has partnered with the International Institute of Islamic Thought to offer a Master's degree program towards Advancing Education in Muslim Societies. The International Training and Educational Program – Advancing Education in Muslim Societies - so the acronym for that is ITEP-AEMS – is a unique opportunity to earn a Master's degree in international education and training with focus on Muslim societies from a reputable university like American University, in the U.S. capital of Washington D.C.! This is a one-year 30-credit hour program, beginning July 2019. Sign up today! For more information, please visit IIIT's website at iiit.org. Just scroll to the bottom where you see announcements and there it'll be! So again, to apply, just visit our website, and if you know someone who would be interested in applying, please share this with them. Thanks so much! We look forward to receiving your applications. Good luck to all applicants!

Also, IIIT is currently accepting applications for its annual Summer Student Program. This is an intensive residential program in Islamic Studies and related subjects designed for graduate and exceptional senior undergraduate students. So this program will take place from June 10 to June 28 of this year. Applicants should apply by March 15, 2019. To apply, fill out your application, attach your resume and transcripts, and write a 250 word personal statement at iiit.org/registration. And merit-based scholarships are available!

Thank you all for listening! To stay up-to-date on everything happening in Advancing Education in Muslim Societies program, please follow IIIT on Twitter (@IIITfriends) and Instagram (@iiit_insta). You won't want to miss our next episode. As a reminder, you can listen to our podcast on Stitcher, Spotify, iTunes and Apple Podcasts, Messy.FM, Google Play and Podcast Mirror. If you liked listening to the content you heard, please subscribe and leave a review at the end. That helps other listeners tune in as well. If you have any questions for us, or would like to join the conversation, please reach out to me! My email is amina@iiit.org.

Thank you all for listening and, we look forward to working together towards transformative education advancing holistic human development. Salaam!