

Short Essay:

Are Afghan women really better-off post invasion?

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The NATO-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 sought primarily to stop Islamic fundamentalism but also freed ordinary Afghans from the repressive Taliban government that had been in place since 1996. It is questionable whether or not these objectives have been fulfilled; Islamic fundamentalism is still on the rise and even though the Taliban do not formally control the central government in Kabul, most Afghans do not enjoy the security or standard of living that had been promised when the NATO allies invaded. Throughout this period in Afghanistan's bloody history women have been the most disadvantaged group in society and their situation has not improved much post-invasion.

This paper will discuss how women's well-being and security have been both enhanced and impeded by the invasion, the reasons for past and continuing gender inequalities and what steps the international community is taking to improve women's rights as well as the actions of home-grown civil organizations. It will also explore the new challenges that Afghan women face in the post-Taliban era, such as a lack of physical security.

NATO forces have attempted to set up a stable government, headed by Hamad Karzai, but its influence has been limited¹. Karzai's government has taken some steps to improve women's rights by creating a special ministry of women's affairs and outlawing cruel tribal traditions like Badal marriages², two strides that were unthinkable during the harmful reign of the Taliban. International NGOs like Canadian women for

Women in Afghanistan (CW4WAfghan) and Home-grown civil organizations, such as the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) have also tried to foster a more secure environment for Afghan women. CW4WAfghan funds education centres for women, giving them the skills they need to become economically independent. The AIHRC highlights human rights abuses in Afghanistan and tries to bring violators of human rights to justice. Domestic violence is one such human rights abuse that the AIHRC tries to prevent, an estimated 50% of Afghan women suffer from this in some form³.

In 2001 the likes of Laura Bush touted the NATO invasion as a triumph for women's rights because women were not longer forced to wear the burqa (a long veil that covers a woman's face) as they had been under Taliban rule, and were permitted to wear make-up and western clothes. The suppression women faced during the Taliban era and from which they are still suffering today are more deep-seated than aesthetics.

The Taliban believed that a women's role was strictly a maternal and domestic one. When they took power in 1996 the "Department for Enforcement of Right Islamic Way and Prevention of Evils" issued a set of edicts that banned women from leaving the house without a male relative, from working and also from speaking to a male who was not a relative⁴. These measures had a devastating impact on Afghan women who were no longer able to work to support their families⁵. Widows, all too common in war-torn Afghanistan, were also impacted negatively without any close male relatives. They had less access to shelter, food, health care, lawyers or projects that generate income⁶. Their position is still similar today.

³ AIHRC, *Evaluation Report on general situation of women*, http://www.aihrc.org.af/rep_eng_wom_situation_8_march.htm

⁴ Sally Armstrong, *Veiled Threat: The hidden power of the women of Afghanistan* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2002), pg 12

⁵ Armstrong, 2

⁶ Carol J. Riphienburg, "Post-Taliban Afghanistan: a changed outlook for women?" *Asian Survey* 44:3 (Jan-June 2004): 408

¹ British Broadcasting Corporation, *Quick Guide: Afghanistan*, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/5140380.stm

² Badal marriages are marriages in which girls are 'sold' to pay a debt or as compensation to a family who her family has wronged.

Sectors that had been traditionally dominated by women such as education also took a hit under the Taliban as most of the workforce disappeared overnight. Some 70% of teaching posts, 50% of government jobs and 40% of medical positions were held by women⁷. Many scholars have pointed out that as women gain greater equality development indicators such as income and life expectancy increase⁸. Increasing gender equality will be a crucial step towards ending the decades-long strife in Afghanistan.

This gender inequality exists primarily because of the lack of education among Afghans, making many susceptible to Taliban indoctrination. The literacy rate is one of the lowest in the world with only 28.1% of the population over the age of 15 able to read⁹. Most educational institutions crumbled under two decades of warfare and were forbidden to women during the Taliban era. The Taliban did not put much emphasis on women's education as they believe that women are inferior under Islam; an incorrect doctrine that several Islamic scholars have condemned¹⁰, yet this was preached throughout the 5 years of Taliban rule.

The idea that women are second-class citizens entered other areas of public life as maternal hospitals became dilapidated due to a lack of funding; leading to the neglect of women's healthcare. As a result Afghanistan has the second highest maternal mortality rate in the world after Sierra Leone¹¹.

Tribal law also comes into play. Even though there is a central government in Kabul that claims to promote women's rights, settlements outside of

Kabul and Kandahar have a law unto themselves, with jirgas (councils of respected village elders) still deciding the fate of some legal cases, including domestic disputes. Jirgas usually sanctify badal marriages and refuse to prosecute the perpetrators of crimes against women such as rape and domestic violence. The Taliban still hold onto certain areas of Afghanistan, and have a huge influence on some of the jirgas outdated thinking.

Not only do the Taliban have control of some areas of Afghanistan, there are former members in the parliament as well; 133 out of 249 seats in the Wolesi Jirga (the elected lower parliament) and 34 seats out of 102 in the Mesharano Jirga (Upper House, appointed by the provincial councils and

the president of Afghanistan) are Taliban. This makes it harder for women parliamentarians and other female public figures to gain legitimacy due to influence of the Taliban members. Women do make up a significant proportion of the non-Taliban members of the Afghan parliament and some are even members of the

“Even though there is a central government in Kabul that claims to promote women's rights, settlements outside of Kabul and Kandahar have a law unto themselves, with jirgas still deciding the fate of some legal cases, including domestic disputes”

cabinet. This increase in female politicians does indicate improved gender equality but they are sometimes undermined by the objections of the Taliban members of parliament and the hate mail and death threats they receive from those who object to their presence in government. Women are also subject to draconian elements of the law itself as was exemplified in the case of Sayed Perwiz Kambakhsh, who was jailed for 20 years after downloading an article about women's rights and Islam¹². Even though she was pardoned, the very

⁷ Saba Gul Khattak, “Afghan women: bombed to be liberated?” *Middle East Report* 222 (Spring, 2002): 19

⁸ Rippenburg, 403

⁹ The CIA World Factbook, *Afghanistan*, <http://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/may/12/muslim-leaders-unite-against-the-taliban/> Muslim leaders unite against the Taliban and also Armstrong, 206

¹¹ Martin Patience, *The struggle to save Afghan mothers*, British Broadcasting Corporation, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/7646821.stm> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/7646821.stm>

¹² “Afghan journalist jailed for downloading women's rights article pardoned,” *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 September 2009,

fact that this case was brought to trial shows that these fundamentalist ideas still pervade.

Some also complained that the Bonn conference, held to discuss Afghanistan's post-invasion reconstruction, was also a male-dominated affair. Of the 60 delegates only 3 were women; considering that the years of bloodshed heavily impacted women as well as men they should have been given a much larger voice¹³.

Geography also plays a big part in gender inequality; some 80% of Afghan women live in rural areas¹⁴. These women seldom have the same educational or employment opportunities that women in larger urban centres have access to. They are also cut-off from ideas of gender equality and are often forced to accept their subordinate position in the family. They also have less access to the reproductive services they need, creating a higher risk of infant mortality and deaths during childbirth. NGOs, the Kabul-based government and home-grown civil institutions have yet to establish the networks or means needed to give these women a voice and an opportunity to become economically and socially independent¹⁵.

Opponents of women's rights in Afghanistan often speak of this trend as a domination of 'western' ideals and accuse NGOs, who try to promote women's rights or even aid women in need, of applying Western ideals of women hood to Afghans. The Taliban were very tough when it came to preventing a "Westernization" of Afghan women hood and often took drastic steps to force women to conform to their standard of Islam, even removing the finger-tips of girls with painted nails¹⁶. Even when NGOs try to help foster a better reproductive health system for women the Taliban consider it 'un-Islamic.' As these ideas spread it

becomes harder for NGOs and Civil organizations to help women.

Women in Afghanistan do not enjoy the same degree of comfort and security that was promised to them after the NATO allies invaded and attempted to establish a democratic government. Most of the prevailing problems, like gender discrimination in the village jirgas, lack of access to education and adequate natal care still persist. As it has become more acceptable for women to enter public life, new issues have arisen, such as the fear of prominent women, including parliamentarians that they will be killed or their families harmed; this undermines the positive impact that female figures could have on public life. Furthermore there is a prevailing fear that fostering women's rights is 'unAfghan' which hampers development efforts.

<http://www.smh.com.au/world/afghan-journalist-jailed-for-downloading-womens-rights-article-pardoned-20090908-fen2.html>

¹³ Judy Aita, *Afghan women look for a place in a new Afghanistan*, Women for Afghan Women,

<http://www.womenforafghanwomen.org/press/usembassy.html>

¹⁴ Rhipenburg, 401

¹⁵ Patience

¹⁶ Armstrong, 4