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THE SEPTEMBER 11 EFFECT

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Robert L. Bach • James D. Ross

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Public Health or Clinical Ethics:

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Afghan Women: Recovering, Rebuilding

Sima Wali

The United States' foreign policy in Afghanistan has a long history of misguided plans and misplaced trust—a fact that has contributed to the destruction of the social and physical infrastructure of Afghan society. Afghans contend that after having fought as U.S. allies against the Soviet Union—with the price of more than two million dead—the United States swiftly walked away at the end of that bloody, twenty-three-year conflict. The toll of the war on Afghan society reflected in current statistics is so staggering as to be practically unimaginable: 12 million women living in abject poverty, 1 million people handicapped from land mine explosions, an average life expectancy of forty years (lower for women), a mortality rate of 25.7 percent for children under five years old, and an illiteracy rate of 64 percent.¹ These horrific indicators place Afghanistan among the most destitute countries in the world in terms of human development.

In 1996 the Taliban walked into this breach, immediately issuing edicts banning Afghan women from the public domain. The harshness of the terms of segregation evoked comparisons with South Africa's apartheid regime—leading human rights organizations in the West to call it “gender apartheid.” Women were prohibited from working outside their homes, attending school, or appearing in public without a close male relative. They were forced to ride on “women only” public buses, were forbidden to wear brightly colored clothes, and had to have the windows in their houses painted so that they could not be seen from outside. Initially, they could only be treated by female doctors; later, they could be examined—but not seen or touched—by male doctors, in the presence of a male relative. The standard punishment for theft and adultery was public stoning, or even execution; yet a woman had no right to petition a court directly.

These ultraconservative policies and the hardships they imposed are by now quite well known—thanks in part to work done before the war in Afghanistan by women's groups in the United States. In 1998, for example, an alliance of women's rights groups protested the U.S. oil company Unocal's collaboration with the Taliban regime in a project to build a natural gas pipeline through Afghanistan. This grass-

¹ United Nations Development Programme, “Focus on Afghanistan: UNDP's Human Development Report Office Presents New Analysis of Socio-economic Indicators for Afghanistan,” available at www.undp.org/dpa/pressrelease/releases/2001/october/8oct01.html.

roots campaign, much like the 1980s anti-apartheid movement for South Africa, publicized the plight of Afghan women and provided a new set of interlocutors in U.S. foreign policy. In essence, the message of this movement was that the conditions of life for Afghan women symbolized the total devastation of Afghan society.

THE STATUS OF WOMEN

From the beginning of the war, the status of women denied even the most basic human rights under the Taliban regime was a significant part of the moral justification for the antiterrorism campaign in Afghanistan. The Taliban's introduction of draconian measures against Afghan women left them exceedingly poor, unhealthy, and uneducated. In Afghan society, women constitute the most underprivileged group: the vast majority of the 22 million Afghans who rely on international assistance for survival have been women.² Globally, they represent the most extreme example of what is known as the "feminization of poverty": for years their health care and nutritional needs have been ignored; their labor has gone unrecognized and unpaid; they have lacked access to education; they have been denied land ownership or inheritance rights; and they have had no decision-making power in the community. That is, they have had none of the resources they would need to escape the cycle of poverty.³

Contributing to this near-total lack of capabilities women in particular have to adequately take care of themselves and their families is the fact that the Afghan crisis is currently the most serious and complex human emergency in the world. There are 1.1 million internally displaced people in Afghanistan⁴ and almost 3.6 million living in neighboring countries.⁵ The majority of them are women. Because of the disproportionate death toll in men during the war against the Soviet Union, it is women who are now charged with taking care of the approximately one million orphaned children, the elderly, and the handicapped—though they are, themselves, traumatized, malnourished, and undersupported.

How can the status of women in Afghanistan improve given these daunting challenges? The first thing to realize is that despite these appalling statistics, Afghan women are resources for development, not just victims. I can testify to their

² Human Rights Watch, "Humanity Denied: Systematic Violations of Women's Rights in Afghanistan," p. 8, available at www.hrw.org/reports/2001/afghan3/afgwrdr1001.pdf.

³ See United Nations, "Fact Sheet No. 1: The Feminization of Poverty," available at www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/followup/session/presskit/fs1.htm.

⁴ See World Bank, "Afghanistan: Facts and Figures at a Glance," April 2002, p. 1, available at [lnweb18.worldbank.org/SAR/sa.nsf/Attachments/dat/\\$File/AfgData.pdf](http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/SAR/sa.nsf/Attachments/dat/$File/AfgData.pdf).

⁵ See United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "2001 UNHCR Population Statistics (Provisional)," p. 11, available at www.reliefweb.int/library/documents/2002/unhcr-stat-07jun.pdf.

resilience and courage and to the contributions they have made in the past two decades of war. While men took up arms, Afghan women and their male supporters were busy rebuilding their communities by providing critically needed human services. Thus the success of rapid development schemes hinges on the formal rehabilitation and active protection of women's equal status in Afghan society.

The implications of gender inequality for the future of Afghanistan are significant given that women represent more than half of the population. Without their participation in political and economic life, it will be impossible for the country to develop and integrate successfully into a global society. What is needed to start the process is an up-to-date, accurate analysis of gender inequality. Reliable basic data—such as the percentage of women in the total population, family size, the number of households headed by women—and human development indicators for health, education, and income were last published in 1996.

Only after the appropriate data is collected can the government create responsible policies for gender mainstreaming—that is, for alleviating the segregation of women and their effective social, economic, and political marginalization. Women must be integrated into all sectors of Afghan society, including public life as paid government employees. For gender inequality to be addressed seriously, women need to participate more proportionately in government (currently, they hold only 11 percent of seats in the *loya jirga* council). They should also hold posts in all ministries, not just in the Ministry of Women's Affairs.

THE WAR ON TERRORISM AND ITS AFTERMATH

Following a long lapse in U.S. interest in Afghanistan, this war-ravaged nation stood at the epicenter of world attention almost immediately after the September 11 attacks on U.S. soil. Afghanistan, which had been denied the credit it was due for having helped free the world of communism, now grabbed headlines for all the wrong reasons. Suddenly made famous as the homeland of the Taliban and host to Osama bin Laden and his mercenaries, Afghanistan was excoriated as a country that waged war against its women. The Western world did not need any more justifications than these to launch its offensive. For the first time in world history, a major war was being linked—however tenuously—to the freedom of women.

Initially, the people of Afghanistan—and women in particular—welcomed U.S. and international forces, publicly rejoicing in the streets of Kabul. As the euphoria wore off, however, the *burqa*-clad women were increasingly unwilling to emerge from their shroud-like coverings, alleging a lack of security, rampant rape, ethnic witch-hunting campaigns against the Pashtun tribe, generalized violence,

and widespread abuse by various factions of the Northern Alliance forces.⁶ Women in refugee camps spoke of becoming the targets of recently disarmed men—whose new weapons were harassment and rape.⁷ Without the protection of security forces, refugee and internally displaced women from neighboring countries who had fled the war fear returning to their home areas in Afghanistan, while others fear leaving their homes to participate in public life as teachers, health workers, entrepreneurs, and government officials.

Given these dangers, women demonstrated remarkable courage during the recent *loya jirga*—the council that met in Kabul June 10–16 to elect a transitional government—by articulating their long-held grievances against warlords and their armed supporters. Giving testimony was not without its risks, particularly for those who came from outside Kabul and whose safe return to their provinces and respectful treatment by local warlords could not be assured. As the campaign to bring down al-Qaeda progressed, both Afghan women and men had to be wary of the increased power of these warlords, whom the U.S.–led forces hoped to win over to the war on terrorism through gifts of weapons and money. Indeed, Afghan women cite this empowerment of warlords as one of the gravest threats to the establishment and the maintenance of a secure environment. For these reasons, multinational peacekeeping forces must be expanded beyond Kabul to provide security for women and all Afghans, and to train Afghan security forces—which should themselves accept women recruits.

In addition to serious questions about basic security for women, there are deep socioeconomic issues for all Afghans such as the lack of adequate employment, education, income, and housing—coupled with a new nepotism among certain forces in power. Under these circumstances, the needs of Afghan women have once again been deferred. However, as the cases of intimidation against Sima Samar, the former minister of women’s affairs, and other female *loya jirga* delegates indicate, women’s issues concern everyone—not just women. Samar was alleged to have said that she did not believe in *sharia* (Islamic law), and was charged in court with blasphemy. Warlords invoked the allegation to threaten her repeatedly, and it became the basis for the Supreme Court chief justice’s claim that she was not fit to hold a government office.⁸ It took the intervention of then-Chairman Karzai to abolish all charges against her and subsequently reassign her

⁶ See, for example, Human Rights Watch, “Taking Cover: Women in Post-Taliban Afghanistan,” May 2002, available at www.hrw.org/backgroundunder/wrd/afghan-women-2k2.pdf.

⁷ See Human Rights Watch, “On the Precipice: Insecurity in Northern Afghanistan,” June 2002, available at www.hrw.org/backgroundunder/asia/afghanistan/afghan-bck.pdf.

⁸ See Human Rights Watch, “Afghanistan: Former Women’s Minister Intimidated,” available at www.hrw.org/press/2002/06/afghan0626.htm.

to head the Human Rights Commission. By undermining the legitimate representation of all Afghan people, gender-inspired threats to current or former government officials directly imperil the prospects for Afghanistan's success in building a state governed by the rule of law and the respect for human rights.

It is thus important that international nongovernmental organizations and other interlocutors pressure national governments to place conditionalities on reconstruction aid that are predicated on gender sensitivity. As soon as the transitional government gains access to the funds promised—but as yet unreleased—at the International Conference for Reconstruction Assistance to Afghanistan in Tokyo last January, the international community will give its first attention to rebuilding political institutions and physical infrastructure, and to making provisions for security forces. Only a fraction of the funds may be used to address the social and civil institutions ravaged by the war. It is here, then, that the international community should reorient some of its priorities toward these latter institutions, and thereby show its commitment to helping build a peaceful, tolerant, and democratic Afghan society.

LOOKING AHEAD

The era when states might commit grave human rights abuses against their own citizens with impunity is past. The U.S. public has, as a result of September 11, broad access to images of and news stories about human beings who are experiencing inordinate suffering. Will they reach out to help? That depends. First, Americans should reconsider the origins of the war in Afghanistan, and come to terms with the United States' own role in it. Second—and consequentially—they should understand that events in Afghanistan directly affect their lives in the United States.

As tragic as the attacks on September 11 were, one of their unintended outcomes was to produce renewed thinking about the need to address the inhumane conditions to which the Afghan people have long been subject. The most striking aspect of this effect is that rhetoric decrying the indecency and criminality of Taliban treatment of Afghan women actually passed from rhetoric to action. This may have simply been a by-product of the U.S.-led war on terrorism, but it should not distract us from accepting and building on these opportunities for the Afghan people and, especially, for Afghan women.