

Operation Enduring Freedom?

By Ritu Sharma and Robert Gustafson

As we all know now, Afghan women and girls were victims even before the recent war began—reeling from two decades of political violence and economic collapse and lacking even the most basic human rights.

Several weeks into Operation Enduring Freedom, it's time to ask, "Whose freedom?" Will life for Afghan women improve under the rule of a new government chaperoned by the U.S. or United Nations? That's highly unlikely unless the U.S. includes the restoration of women's constitutional rights among its foreign policy objectives for Afghanistan and provides assistance to ensure that women can access these rights.

Lest you think this goal is a fantasy, consider this: Until 1991 Afghan women had rights to education, work, vote, and hold elected office. Prior to Taliban rule, women played an important role in public life in Afghanistan. In 1964, women served on the constitutional drafting committee. In the 1970s, women were appointed to the ministries of education, health, and law; and in 1977 women made up over 15% of the members of the *Loya Jirga*, the highest decisionmaking body in Afghanistan. During the war with Russia in the 1980s, women ran military hospitals and other institutions, and more than 70% of teachers, nurses, doctors, and small business owners in Afghanistan were women. No longer. Since the onset of civil war and the rise of the Taliban in 1996, women have been removed from public life and stripped of their rights.

Freeing Afghanistan without restoring women's human, political, and economic rights would leave in place this terrible legacy of religious fundamentalism. The economic and political participation of women will be essential for Afghanistan's reconstruction, and should be a

leading objective of U.S. policy throughout Central Asia.

For freedom to endure, the U.S. must help the people of Afghanistan and Central Asia build strong economies and democratic political systems. It will be impossible to achieve these goals without restoring the economic, human, and political rights that have been taken away from women. Where such rights have never existed, U.S. policy should work to introduce them. The people of Afghanistan and the region have a massive task of economic reconstruction and social regeneration before them. Excluding the input, talent, and special abilities of more than half of the population will hobble the effort, making assistance from the United States and other well-meaning donors less effective—and possibly even dooming the effort.

Armed conflicts like the long-running civil war in Afghanistan create large numbers of female-headed households, because the men have been conscripted, detained, displaced, or killed. Women's roles shift to emphasize their economic role as providers and as the backbone of community networks. Investing in women in post-conflict situations can magnify the gains of reconstruction programs. United Nations, World Bank, and U.S. studies amply demonstrate that women invest their earnings directly in the health, welfare, and education of their children, thus creating a long-term cycle of poverty reduction that spans generations. Looking beyond the war, we need to support programs that help women earn income that will help children, who in turn will go on to be healthy, educated, and productive citizens themselves.

Although Afghanistan will be the center of U.S. attention in the region, we should not forget the conditions of the other Central Asian Republics. Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and

Uzbekistan, all former Soviet republics, are struggling to build self-sustaining economies. Since 1991 these countries have experienced debilitating outbreaks of violent political conflict as secular and Islamic leaders struggle to establish a new political balance in the aftermath of the long domination by the communist system. Tajikistan, for instance, has had three civil wars since its independence. Gender-balanced development assistance is needed to assist with this process, and to ensure that women's economic and human rights are acknowledged and nurtured by these fledgling governments.

Life for women in Afghanistan's neighboring countries, where many refugees are resettling, is not much

better. In chronically corrupt Pakistan, women's rights are routinely denied. A 1999 Human Rights Watch report, "Women Face Their Own Crisis," chronicles a virtual epidemic of violence against women, including domestic violence rates as high as 90%, at least eight reported rapes every 24 hours nationwide, and an alarming rise in so-called honor killings. In Uzbekistan, women are rapidly losing rights they gained during the Soviet occupation of the region. Women are working and earning less, and they are increasingly less likely to obtain higher education or hold elected positions. Women in Tajikistan have also seen their prospects dim as the country moves away from Soviet control. Women there face a large gender gap in terms of employment and wages; only 10%

of women actively seeking work are able to find it.

Ultimately, the role that women play in the economic and political reconstruction of Afghanistan and the Central Asian republics should be based on the aspirations and capabilities of area women. Societies with broad economic opportunity and political participation are the most productive, stable, and friendly to the United States.

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