

## ***Afghan Women: Enduring American “Freedom”***

By Sonali Kolhatkar

In January 2002, George W. Bush told us in his State of the Union Address: “The last time we met in this chamber, the mothers and daughters of Afghanistan were captives in their own homes, forbidden from working or going to school. Today women are free ...” Last month, in an October 11th statement, the president again congratulated himself: “We went into Afghanistan to free people, because we believe in freedom. We believe every life counts. Every life matters. So we’re helping people recover from living under years of tyranny and oppression. We’re helping Afghanistan claim its democratic future.”

The U.S. military campaign in Afghanistan was called “Operation Enduring Freedom.” With all this talk of freedom, it is important to ask the question, how are Afghan women enduring American-style freedom?

When we think of women’s rights in Afghanistan, we think of the imprisonment of the burqa, the traditional Islamic head to foot covering that the Taliban forced women to wear. George Bush certainly seems to subscribe to this view. But many Afghan women wore the burqa before and after the Taliban. In the rural areas of Afghanistan, the majority of women covered themselves. Contrary to what President Bush would have us believe, the problems facing Afghan women run far deeper than the type of clothing they wear. Food security, access to healthcare, and safety from physical violence are key aspects of women’s rights that the U.S. intervention has largely ignored or in some cases even jeopardized.

### **Coming Winter Brings Starvation**

Afghanistan’s harsh winter returns in November, and thousands of Afghans, devastated by three years of drought and 23 years of war

and civil unrest, will be facing winter and starvation. Take the Badghis province of Afghanistan for example—one of the poorest. Roughly 50% of Badghis’s population of approximately 400,000 will not obtain enough food this winter. Fatema, a resident of Badghis, doesn’t know how she will feed her six children this year. Her 15-year-old son is the only one in the family who can earn any money and he does it by selling grass for fuel and food. Two months ago they were refugees, but they recently returned to their home. Fatema’s family is among the millions of displaced persons and refugees that have returned home since the fall of the Taliban.

When George Bush promised us that Afghan women were free, he assuaged our guilt as the bombs rained down on Afghanistan, picking off wedding parties, cutting off crucial winter aid routes, delaying spring plantings of wheat. According to Bush, at least women can now walk around without a burqa. But what good is an uncovered face if that person is starving to death? Women’s rights are human rights: survival is more important than clothing and survival has been the most difficult challenge facing women both before and after the U.S. action in Afghanistan.

### **Women’s Health Still in Crisis**

A recent report released by the U.S.-based Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) entitled “Maternal Mortality in Herat Province: The Need to Protect Women’s Rights” noted that the rate of maternal mortality in a society is a critical indicator of the health and human rights status of women in a community. The report documented 593 maternal deaths in every 100,000 live births, with the majority of the cases in rural areas. This maternal mortality rate in Afghanistan is far worse than that expe-

rienced in all neighboring countries. Pakistan suffers the next highest rate, with 200 deaths per 100,000 births. A researcher with PHR concluded, "What appears to be simply a public health catastrophe in Herat Province... speaks of the many years of denial and deprivation of women's rights in Afghanistan."

Widows are an especially vulnerable sector of the Afghani society. In Kabul alone there are an estimated 40,000 widows who have lost their husbands in the decades of war in Afghanistan. Nationwide, the number of widows is estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands. An estimated 1.5 million Afghans were killed during the ten-year Soviet occupation and during the crossfire from warlord battles that followed in the early 1990s. "While the plight of Afghan widows has improved psychologically, the main problems of finding shelter, food, and income remain the same," says Awadia Mohamed, the coordinator for CARE International in Afghanistan. "Indeed, in some cases they have worsened." Widows have very limited access to food and health services despite the absence of the Taliban. In fact, "Fifty-one percent of widows surveyed reported being unwell, of whom 57.6% had fever, 13.6% had diarrhea, and 10% leishmaniasis wounds... Furthermore, calorie intake was insufficient, with most of the women and their children subsisting on little more than bread and tea, resulting in malnutrition problems and micronutrient deficiencies."

Hunger and lack of healthcare indicate the deprivation of the basic rights of mothers, daughters, and widows. Where are the media and their cameras now?

## Warlords Threaten Security for Women

Article 3 of the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" states that "Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person." If the right to survival is a fundamental principle of women's rights, freedom from insecurity is another. But insecurity is a euphemism for war, and for more violence and bloodshed.

Practically speaking, since the Taliban fell and warlords of the past returned to their old fiefdoms, they resumed fighting one another, exactly what they were doing when the Taliban first came to power. According to Agence France-Presse, "Northern Afghanistan remains plagued by factional and ethnic rivalries despite loose allegiances between warlords controlling the area, most of whom have offered pledges of support to the central Afghan government.

The media has failed to highlight that many of these warlords, who joined the loose Northern Alliance, were first empowered by the United States in the 1980s to repel the Soviet invasion, and then again during the 2001 overthrow of the Taliban. The Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) warned last year: "The Taliban and al Qaeda will be eliminated, but the existence of the NA [Northern Alliance] as a military force would shatter the joyful dream of the majority for an Afghanistan free from the odious chains of barbaric Taliban. The NA will horribly intensify the ethnic and religious conflicts and will never refrain to fan the fire of another brutal and endless civil war in order to retain in power." Rather than heed the words of RAWA and other NGOs, the U.S. engaged the services of the Northern Alliance, with the

CIA paying warlords \$100,000 each to gather armies.

Afghan women desperately want better security for themselves, and families are desperate for security. As a result, they are advocating that the International Security Armed Forces (ISAF) be expanded from Kabul to all of Afghanistan. But the U.S. continues to oppose such an extension of the peacekeeping force. Even Hamid Karzai, installed as the president of Afghanistan with America's blessing, has asked for the ISAF to be expanded throughout Afghanistan so that warlords can be disarmed and a transition to peace can begin. Instead, the U.S. has been focusing on training a national army of Afghans, which is undermined by the fact that Afghan Defense Minister Mohammed Qasim Fahim himself has a private army of 18,000 men.

## Girls' Schools Still Under Attack

In March of this year the *Washington Post* published a story headlined "The Girls Are Back in Afghan Schools." One could almost hear the collective sigh of relief across America—the knowledge that our good war, meant to liberate Afghan women, was working. But why isn't the media reporting the recent spate of seven attacks against schools in Afghanistan? Schools have been burned down in Kandahar, Wardak and Sar-i-Pul. In the latest incident, a gunman forced a school in the Wardak province that served 1,300 girls to close. In recent weeks girls' schools have been burned and bombed.

## "Saving" Afghan Women

It has become axiomatic that the issue of women's rights is always politically manipulated by the powerful, to jus-

tify almost anything. In the late 70s, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and claimed to be saving Afghan women. Then they began assassinating men who opposed the invasion, leaving thousands of women widowed. The U.S. backed the mujahedeen resistance (many of whom now comprise the Northern Alliance) and claimed to be saving women, from the “godless” communists. Then these U.S.-designated “freedom fighters” routinely raped women, forced them into marriages, and tortured their husbands. The Taliban took over from the mujahedeen, claiming to save Afghan women. Then they forced them to stay at home (for their own good), stop going to school, and be denied access to medical care. And finally, George Bush organized a crusade to save Afghan women.

It is time to rethink promises made by powerful men to save Afghan

women. Afghan women don't need saving. They know perfectly well how to save themselves: the brave work of RAWA in the fields of education, health care, political agitation and demands for secularism, democracy, and women's rights, is a testament to this. The West does not hold a monopoly on these issues. What Afghan women need is for the U.S. to stop imposing freedom through bombs, stop backing human rights violators and warlords, and stop hindering the security forces from expanding to the rest of the country.

The struggle of Afghan women has been reduced in the United States to a simplistic discussion about the burqa. Don the burqa and you're oppressed, take it off and, lo and behold, you're free. But what does this really mean? It means that to constantly portray Afghan women as weak, covered up, defenseless, and needing our help, makes us feel good

about helping Afghan women, about saving them. To express solidarity with Afghan women, we need to understand what affects them, starting with what we are responsible for and have the power to change—the use of bombs and warlords as tools of U.S. policy. We need to begin treating Afghan women with dignity and not reduce them to a piece of clothing. Afghan women's rights are a crucial part of the equation of Afghanistan. One year later, it is clear that Afghan women are not “free”—they are simply enduring American freedom.

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