

Afghan Women Continue to Fend for Themselves

By Sonali Kolhatkar | March 2004

Bombed into Liberation

A recent *New York Times* article accurately portrayed two Afghan women from the poor farming village of Haji Bai Nazar, as “heroines” for de-mining their village.¹ Khairulnisah and Nasreen have the United States military campaign in Afghanistan to thank for a deadly legacy of cluster bomblets that litter their village and that recently killed two young boys. These small yellow canisters are part of the “liberation” of Afghan women by a Bush administration that reminds us continually of the feminist achievements of Operation Enduring Freedom. The United States dropped over 1,200 cluster bombs over Afghanistan. Wrapped in an innocuous package each bomb deploys its deadly load of 202 bomblets, of which 10-22% remain unexploded, strewn over villages such as Haji Bai Nazar.² Afghan women are left to take responsibility for the U.S.’s unexploded cluster ordinance which has added to Afghanistan’s ten million existing land mines from previous wars.

For anyone who was under the impression that the bombings of wedding processions and other Afghan civilian gatherings were a thing of the past, this January, a U.S. helicopter murdered 11 civilians in their home, among them 3 women and 4 children. The district chief, Abdul Rahman told Associated Press, “They were simple villagers, they were not Taliban. I don’t know why the U.S. bombed this home.”³ Even the U.S.-backed interim President Hamid Karzai agreed with this assessment.⁴ The official U.S. response to this was an insistence that in fact “five armed anti-coalition militia members” had been killed.⁵ Impunity allows such a response to go unchallenged.

There has been a continuous, steady trickle of a few deaths here, a few there, in Afghanistan—not enough to warrant news headlines. According to the BBC this January, “In early December, six Afghan children died during a U.S. assault in eastern Paktia province. The next day, nine more died in a field in Ghazni province after a U.S. air attack.” More than two years after “Operation Enduring Freedom” began in Afghanistan, Afghan women and children are still enduring death by U.S.-style freedom.

The U.S.’s destructive role in Afghanistan goes back many years from the fueling of extremist fundamentalism in the “jihad” against the Soviet Union, to the lukewarm

engagement with the Taliban.⁶ And every step of the way Afghan women faced a worsening climate of fear, repression, and misogyny as a result. Today, the countryside is overrun with Afghan warlords, resurrected from the pre-Taliban era—these warlords, who also targeted women, were the main reason for initial widespread public acceptance of the Taliban’s promise of peace and stability in 1996. The warlords, many of whom hold high-level positions in the interim government thanks to the intervention of U.S. officials, are just as disrespectful of women’s rights today as the Taliban.⁷

Rhetoric Versus Reality

An October 2003 Amnesty International (AI) Report entitled “‘No one listens to us and no one treats us as human beings’: Justice denied to women” concludes that “Two years after the ending of the Taleban regime, the international community and the [U.S.-backed] Afghan Transitional Administration (ATA), led by President Hamid Karzai, have proved unable to protect women.” In fact, AI claims that “In parts of Afghanistan, women have stated that the insecurity and the risk of sexual violence they face make their lives worse than during the Taleban era” and that “women and girls in Afghanistan are threatened with violence in every aspect of their lives.”⁸

In the meantime, desperately needed and promised aid has trickled in far too slowly. A report released by the international humanitarian organization, CARE last year declared, “Much of the country remains a tinderbox, with reconstruction all but stalled, and ordinary Afghans wondering if reality will ever match the rhetoric.”⁹

But U.S. officials still repeat the lie of “liberation.” National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice said this February of the Afghan and Iraqi people, “Under President Bush’s leadership... our men and women in uniform have delivered freedom to more than 50 million people in the space of two-and-a-half years.”¹⁰ More specifically to Afghan women, a White House press release this January asserts that “Millions of Afghan women are experiencing freedom for the first time.”¹¹ The rhetoric extends to the spreading of democracy: Vice President Dick Cheney declared on February 7th, “Under President



Karzai's leadership, and with the help of our coalition, the Afghan people are building a decent and a just and a democratic society."¹² U.S. government officials seem to occupy a separate plane of existence from the rest of us. Amnesty International's research revealed last year that the Afghan criminal justice system, the police, and the Afghan National Army are all implicated in women's oppression.¹³ Mariam Rawi of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan agrees that in addition to warlords, the Afghan government itself threatens women: "In spite of its rhetoric, the Karzai government actively pursues policies that are anti-women."¹⁴

Another example of rhetoric versus reality in Afghanistan is the hubbub over "Osama," the first feature film from post-Taliban Afghanistan, which recently won the Golden Globe award for Best Foreign Language Film. The film was written and directed by Siddiq Barmak, an aide to Ahmad Shah Masood. Masood was the late charismatic warlord leader of the U.S.-backed Northern Alliance, which may explain why the Bush administration and others such as Hillary Clinton are giving rave reviews and even arranging screenings for U.S. troops in Afghanistan and Iraq. Secretary of State Colin Powell commented that the movie "will teach you why President Bush is right about waging the war on terrorists until there are no more of them."¹⁵

Despite being used to promote the Bush administration's agenda, the actors in the film, played by untrained, poor, Afghan children, remain miserably poor—even after the international success of the film. Marina Gulbahari, the 13-year-old girl who plays the main character in the film was begging on the streets of post-Taliban Kabul when she was first noticed by the filmmaker. Today Gulbahari's life remains about the same as it was before: "She still lives in the one-room mud house, and though she will be moving next month to a bigger house that Barmak bought for her, it is still a mud home without electricity or water... her youngest brother and sister still go out on the streets, to collect cans, she says, although it seems likely that they are begging."¹⁶ Ariff Herati, a 14-year-old who plays Marina's friend in the film, was found at a refugee camp and, after the release and promotion of the movie, he "still lives in a windowless mud hut in the camp."¹⁷

Aid Eludes Afghans

Even the filmmaker Siddiq Barmak, whose film is being promoted by U.S. government officials, speaks of "friends" in "different countries" who "promise us a lot of things for our country, but they didn't employ these promises

[sic]."¹⁸ CARE, which operates several programs in Afghanistan, agrees with Barmak: "Despite constant requests from the Afghan government for more reconstruction funds, and months of positive "signals" on funding from the United States and Europe, sufficient funds have yet to flow to reconstruction projects in Afghanistan."¹⁹

At a Tokyo donors' conference in 2002, when aiding Afghanistan was a valuable public exercise, the international community pledged \$4.5 billion over five years for reconstruction projects (excluding humanitarian assistance). More than half of these pledges have been diverted to humanitarian assistance rather than reconstruction projects over the past two years, and even that has not been adequate to fulfill needs. Less than \$1 billion of international aid has actually come through for reconstruction projects.²⁰ Today, Afghanistan's Finance Ministry has estimated that the country now needs roughly \$28 billion over the next seven years! Meanwhile the U.S. has allocated \$1.6 billion dollars to Afghanistan this year, a disproportionate amount compared to its investment in the higher-profile case of Iraq. The U.S. allocated \$22 billion to Iraq, a country about the same size and population as Afghanistan, and whose "standard of living is decades ahead of Afghanistan."²¹

Researching the actual dollars set aside by the U.S. for humanitarian and other aid specifically for Afghan women is a tough exercise: the projects are high-profile but very small in scope. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) recently launched a new program in Afghanistan called "Learning for Life," which according to U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad "will raise Afghan literacy rates and health training and will help reduce high maternal and child mortality rates." These lofty goals could fulfill some dire needs of Afghan women and give the impression that the U.S. is perhaps actually interested in Afghan women's rights. But a simple examination will reveal why Ambassador Khalilzad does not provide specific numerical goals: only \$4.9 million has been set aside for this program by USAID. For a country whose needs run into the tens of billions of dollars, a few million will do no more than make a negligible dent in health, literacy, and education. Compare this to \$700 million allocated for "police and army training, and counter-narcotics efforts" (see below). More importantly, programs like "Learning for Life" will raise the profile of the beneficiary.

Examining the details of the paltry amount of U.S. aid this year reveals that most of the money is set aside for economic enterprises rather than specific humanitarian

projects that would benefit women. According to a State Department press release, the \$1.6 billion from the U.S. is designated to generate “visible, measurable, on-the-ground results” to be completed by the June elections. Of this, \$700 million will fund “police and army training, and counter-narcotics efforts.” Certainly better security could do wonders for Afghan women’s safety, but the more important consideration, according to the State Department, is that “improved security ... is needed for an improved investment climate and for raising economic growth.” Much of the remaining aid will go toward stimulating “private sector economic activity,” and “building 100 market centers and 5 new industrial parks.”²² Impoverished Afghan women will simply have to find ways to take advantage of the “improved investment climate” and fit into the U.S.’s free market model of development after decades of U.S.-sponsored wars.

New Afghan Constitution Inadequate

One wonders how Afghanistan can dive headlong into elections sponsored by a power that is currently bombing it, or while Afghans are awaiting aid. Still, the United States is determined to push ahead; in early January 2004, a constitutional convention ratified a draft constitution presented by the U.S.-backed Hamid Karzai, enshrining a strong presidency for Afghanistan. The constitution also asserted equality for men and women, something that even the U.S. constitution does not claim: “The citizens of Afghanistan—whether man or woman—have equal rights and duties before the law.” However, possibly negating any rights of women is the ominous inclusion of the supremacy of Islamic law in the constitution: “in Afghanistan, no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred religion of Islam.” As if to underscore the threat this statement presents, the Chairman of the constitutional convention, or Loya Jirga, Sibghatullah Mojadidi, said to the women delegates at the convention, “Even God has not given you equal rights because under his decision two women are counted as equal to one man.”²³ One young Afghan woman stood up to these misogynist sentiments: Malalai Joya denounced the presence of warlords, suggesting instead that they be tried in a court of law. In response, Chairman Mojadidi labeled her a “communist” and “infidel” and ordered she be thrown out of the meeting.

Despite the inhospitable atmosphere Afghan women faced at the convention, the constitution is being touted by the Bush administration as an indication of the arrival

of democracy in Afghanistan. But, according to writer and filmmaker Meena Nanji, the document is inadequate for any implementation of democracy: “While on paper it does make sweeping enunciations of equality, democracy, economic, civil, and political rights, there is little about creating the institutions to uphold or implement these provisions. Without the means to actually enforce laws, the constitution carries little authority—perhaps none in the face of armed warlords.”²⁴

The U.S. and interim U.S.-backed President Hamid Karzai are currently moving toward a June 2004 timetable for elections. But with U.S. bombs still dropping overhead, and warlords threatening to fracture the country, what is the hurry? The Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU) released a report in November 2003 saying “there are real risks in allowing foreign agendas to become the driving force pushing for elections within a timeframe that may jeopardize Afghanistan’s future.” The AREU hints that U.S. enthusiasm for this timeline is a “result of the Bush administration’s need for a foreign policy and ‘war-on-terror’ success ahead of the November 2004 presidential elections in the U.S.”²⁵ The election of a U.S.-friendly puppet such as Karzai, would be just the feather in Bush’s cap come November.

Where does this leave Afghan women? At the writing of this commentary, less than 10% of an estimated 10.5 million voters have registered to vote in this election. Of these, only one quarter are women.²⁶ This is no surprise in a country where only approximately 4-15 % of women are literate (estimates vary). Even women who can read the ballot are expected to register to vote in an election they have had no say in or been kept out of by fundamentalist forces. Additionally, for some women, the election probably takes lower priority than obtaining adequate food, medicine, and other life-giving necessities.

Women candidates who try to work within the current election system face co-optation. Masooda Jalal is the only female presidential contender in the elections. The election of a woman as president provides no guarantee that women’s rights will be upheld, and is no indication of free and fair elections. However, it can be a strong indication of support for women playing a role in politics. Jalal won second place votes the last time she challenged Karzai at the summer 2002 Loya Jirga and is gearing up for a second attempt. Hamid Karzai, who, like the U.S., claims to uphold women’s rights, apparently tried to convince Jalal to run as his deputy instead of against him, ahead of the vote at the summer Loya Jirga.²⁷

“U.S. Commitment to Afghan Women”

Two years ago, with much fanfare, the U.S.-Afghan Women’s Council (UAWC) was announced in post-Taliban Afghanistan. According to their website, the UAWC was founded “to promote private/public partnerships between U.S. and Afghan institutions and mobilize private resources to ensure Afghan women gain the skills and education deprived them under years of Taliban misrule.” Headed by Paula Dobriansky, Under Secretary of State for Global Affairs, and Habiba Sarabi, the Afghan Minister of Women’s Affairs, this Council is a perfect showcase for the Bush administration’s rhetoric of liberation.

A year ago, in 2003, a delegation of American women from the UAWC, including Karen Hughes, former Counselor to President Bush, visited Kabul. At that meeting, Hughes was asked about the Afghan burqa by a reporter, to which she acknowledged that Afghan women still live in fear. The burqa is still considered by U.S. feminists and the media as the most important measure of Afghan women’s freedom, despite strong public critique of this type of cultural imperialist logic. Hughes’ sympathy knew no bounds and she offered her own presence as an antidote to the fear represented by the burqa: “One of the things that we heard in the meeting is that there is still a substantial amount of fear and so I think one of the whole purposes of a delegation of largely women visiting from the United States of America is to maybe provide some small sense of encouragement to the women of Afghanistan.”²⁸

The delegation is a yearly exercise—this February, a similar high-profile delegation plus Defense Secretary’s wife Joyce Rumsfeld, and others, paid a visit to Afghanistan. There they informed Afghan women that the women of the United States have not forgotten them. Afghan women are still useful tools for U.S. feminists to employ in their public relations campaigns, especially on the eve of International Women’s Day.

Apparently the words of Karen Hughes in 2003 made such a difference to the lives of Afghan women that a year later according to one news report, Ms. Hughes was impressed by the “different shades of dark hair visible on burka-free Afghan women.” She remarked “There’s a big change here... There’s more shops, there’s more energy. There’s more women on the streets [sic].”²⁹ But the yearly trips of the UAWC are largely restricted to the capital, Kabul, where International Security Assistance Forces have

ensured a relatively secure atmosphere and spared the ladies the trauma and violence of the countryside. Operating mostly inside Kabul enables high-profile U.S. women to highlight their benevolent efforts toward Afghan women without addressing the reality of most Afghan women’s lives.

Consistent with the Bush administration’s main interest in stimulating “private sector economy” in Afghanistan, the UAWC’s core mission is to “develop and foster partnerships between the private and public sectors,” according to a U.S. State department press release.³⁰ In fact, the title of this press release underscores the real value of the UAWC to the U.S.—“U.S. Commitment to Afghan Women: The U.S.-Afghan Women’s Council.”

So committed is the U.S. to Afghan women that the Council has no formal budget and instead “relies on its members—White House aides, State Department experts, businesswomen, and educators—to raise money, either U.S. government or private funds.”³¹ So far the U.S. government has provided only \$2.5 million, while corporate sponsors such as AOL/Time Warner, Daimler-Chrysler-Benz, and other various organizations have provided a few tens of thousands of dollars each.

The UAWC has also partnered with several organizations for skills and training resources for Afghan women. One partner of the UAWC is the particularly troubling University of Nebraska. The Center for Afghanistan Studies at the University of Nebraska received funding from USAID for a program designed by the CIA in the 1980s to promote anti-Soviet propaganda among Afghan Mujahedin through text books that “promoted and strengthened an era of jihad violence” and teacher trainings. More recently the Center won a contract with the oil corporation Unocal, to train hundreds of Afghan men under the Taliban to construct an oil pipeline.³² The pipeline project was protested vehemently by American feminists, who condemned Unocal for doing business with the misogynist Taliban. Today, the UAWC “has initiated a teacher training exchange that is bringing 30 Afghan women teachers to Nebraska every 6 months for training.”

In addition to ignoring the reality of Afghan women’s lives outside Kabul, the UAWC is a convenient showpiece of the Bush administration’s self-described “commitment to Afghan women,” and is consistent with the historical and current consequences of U.S. actions toward Afghan women.

If the U.S. Were Really Interested in Afghan Women's Rights...

In 2001, a month after Operation Enduring Freedom began, U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell said, "if we do everything we can to help reconstitute Afghan society and give people hope for a better future, we will not fail."³³

But "we" have failed Afghan women, and in fact, failure seems almost deliberate. Putting aside for a moment the physical and political destruction of the U.S. military and government campaigns, a few concrete steps could have done much more in practical terms to help Afghan women. For example:

1. Instead of arming and empowering fundamentalist warlords who threaten women's safety, the U.S. could have participated in disarming them. After all, the U.S. was the original benefactor to most of these armed men during the jihad of the 1980s. Today, the government of Japan, not the United States, is funding the crucial "Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration" project supervised by the United Nations. This program has already disarmed 1,000 men from each of the armies of two rival warlords, Abdul Rashid Dostum and Mohammed Atta. The program registers the disarmed men to vote, provides them with a little cash and food, and informs them of their employment options.³⁴ Since the U.S. is still

actively working with the warlords, the effectiveness of such a program is sadly in question.

2. Malnutrition, maternal mortality, and other treatable conditions still plague Afghan women. Instead of funding paltry private enterprise through the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council and U.S. AID the Bush administration could have pledged billions of dollars in aid toward hospitals for women, food assistance, girls' schools, and other life-saving actions throughout Afghanistan. If spending on the occupation of Iraq is any indication, the U.S. can clearly spare such amounts of money.

Colin Powell made a promise in 2001: "The rights of the women of Afghanistan will not be negotiable."³⁵ Yet, more than two years later, the number and manner of dollars spent, and the actual situation on the ground reveals that Afghan women's rights have been clearly negotiated in exchange for political gains, manipulated for public relations success stories, under-funded, or ignored altogether.

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