



NEW THREAT TO AFGHAN WOMEN

Why Real Progress Is at Risk of Reversal After Western Forces Withdraw

By Manizha Naderi

Public support for the war in Afghanistan began to wane in 2009 in the United States and even earlier in NATO countries. It was based on war weariness, the cost in money and lives, and the perception that the war had not been worth fighting, the troublesome country not worth saving. Unfortunately, those ideas, which governments and mainstream media have done very little to counter, obscure real progress in Afghanistan since 2002, in particular, notable achievements in women's rights. The lack of information about those achievements is especially surprising because many Western countries have been financially supporting programs whose goal has been accessing justice for Afghan women and because the brutal treatment of women in Afghanistan has been considered a cultural disease so deep and so resistant to intervention as to be virtually incurable. It is important that the people of these donor countries know that far from being wasted, the billions of dollars spent to rebuild Afghanistan and the lives lost have served a just cause. The development of the rule of law in Afghanistan still has a way to go, but whatever stability the country now enjoys is due in large measure to the progress on women's rights.

During the years of Taliban rule from 1996 to 2001, shocking stories and photographs of the inhuman treatment of women in Afghanistan appeared in the media, often accompanied by lists of human rights abuses: the denial of their education on all levels resulted in a 82 percent illiteracy rate among women; the denial of any medical treatment for a woman or girl by a male doctor resulted in the world's highest maternal mortality rate. Other abuses included the denial of choice of husband or freedom of mobility, forced and underage marriages, domestic violence that often amounted to torture, forced prostitution, honor killings for adultery, and prison sentences for women running away from abuse.

◁ Women vote in the Afghan presidential election, Balkh, June 14, 2014. *Sayed Khodaberdi Sadat/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images*

The world bestowed the greatest blame for this state of affairs on the Taliban and, even if we include the earlier years when the civil war raged and women suffered mightily as social conventions broke down, the subjugation of women would seem to have been a temporary aberration, something that could be turned around once the butchers left and life returned to normal. Of course, some people knew or learned that the warlords and the Taliban were actually capitalizing on traditions that had flourished for centuries in Afghanistan, especially in rural areas, where the majority of the people have always lived. Such traditions had acquired a life of their own; their hold on the people had become stronger than much older and more progressive Islamic teachings on women. The absolute denial of education to females allowed misinformation about Islam to grow deep roots. How could women learn about their rights in the Quran or the concept of human rights in the modern world and their entitlement to those rights if they couldn't read?

In view of the odds against any progress happening at all, the fact that forward movement on women's rights has taken place in a brief thirteen years may seem miraculous. But miracles have had nothing to do with it. Progress has happened for one reason only: the Afghan people want it. Afghan women's rights activists and organizations can claim most of the credit for the transformation, but none of it could have occurred if the majority of Afghans were opposed. That's the key point. It tells us about the potential in Afghanistan for peace and good governance. If only governments, if only the world, grasped it and understood its importance.

Building the Rule of Law

Women's rights organizations like Women for Afghan Women (WAW) work with individual women and girls who have been denied basic human rights and who would lack access to justice were it not for the caseworkers and lawyers who mediate with their families, defend them in court, arrange medical treatment for the most grievously wounded, take care of their children, and rehabilitate their lives. We talk and write about individual cases all the time to publicize our work and raise money to support it. But what we seldom get the opportunity to state is that by providing not one but thousands of women and girls access to justice and teaching the population about women's entitlement to universal human rights, Afghan women's rights organizations are building the rule of law in a country that a mere thirteen years ago was ruled by laws whose only purpose was to keep the people in chains. They are major contributors to the single most important activity that must take place if a nation like Afghanistan is to become a stable democracy. That achievement would be good for Afghanistan, good for the United States, and good for the world—an idea that gets lost in the rush to leave.

Women's entitlement to human rights is not frosting on a cake, not a side issue that can wait for attention until all other global crises are solved—although governments often treat it as such. You can read thousands of articles on failures in Afghanistan, on President Hamid Karzai's instability and untrustworthiness, on the corruption of the government, on the green-on-blue attacks by Afghan troops on Western counterparts, on the corrupt elections, and many dozens about horrific cases of attacks on women. But you will find very few analyses of the progress on women's rights in Afghanistan and the significance of that progress. The great story, which has not been told, is that the rule of law has indeed been strengthened in Afghanistan due to the support of women's rights by the United States and other countries and due to the courage and dedication of the women of Afghanistan.

Of the eight million people across Afghanistan who are enrolled in school today, 40 percent are females. This is an immense increase over the number during the Taliban period, when girls were barred from attending school. As fewer girls are forced into underage marriages and more girls continue their education, life spans increase and the national economy improves. Unfortunately, the figures remain low on the primary and especially on the secondary school level, but not because Afghans oppose education for their daughters. The majority of the people live in tiny rural villages where there are no schools or where the schools are too far away for girls to walk to in safety. Or there are not enough trained teachers in the country—or teachers who want to move into primitive rural areas where they may be risking their lives. For the Taliban continue to burn down girls schools, threaten and actually murder their teachers, and keep schools for girls from opening altogether, especially in areas they control. For example, in Kandahar, a southern province under Taliban control, the overall literacy rate of girls six plus years of age fell from 16 percent in 2005 to 7 percent in 2011, and in 2012, only 300 of over 5,000 students in Kandahar University were female. In other words, one of the poorest countries in the world has to build an educational system for a population of over 30 million from the ground up and has to do it against overwhelming odds.

In 1998, Afghanistan had the highest maternal mortality rate ever recorded, but according to the World Bank, between the years 2000 and 2010, maternal mortality rates decreased nearly 80 percent, from 1,600 to 330 per 100,000 live births. The decrease is due in part to a 36 percent increase in prenatal health care during the same period as women re-entered the workforce as midwives, obstetricians, and gynecologists. In addition, with the criminalizing of underage marriages in the 2009 Law on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (LEVAW), girls are less likely to have children before they are biologically ready. The law also criminalizes twenty-one other abuses, including rape (for the first time in the country's history), the exchange

of women and girls to settle a dispute between families, forced prostitution, and psychological abuse.

Today, women across Afghanistan can be found working outside the home in a variety of industries from medicine to technology to government. Afghan women are playing a significant role in the political arena and the stabilizing of the nascent democracy. In the last parliamentary elections in 2010, sixty-nine women won seats in Afghanistan's 249-seat parliament—the next parliamentary vote will be held in 2015. According to the Afghan Independent Election Commission, 36 percent of the 6.8 million people who cast ballots during the 2014 presidential election were female. This number rose to 38 percent during the second round. Female voters turned out despite an increase in violence leading up to and during the elections. One woman's vote was so important in the Baghlan province that she managed to get to the polls in the runoff just before delivering a son.

Safety in Shelters

Women in Afghanistan who are victims of violence are becoming aware of and demanding their right to violence-free lives. A 2013 report on the LEVAW by the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) notes that the number of women or families who reported abuse and sought help rather than submitting to it was up 28 percent from the previous year. If there were more shelters and other facilities providing services to women and girls in the country, that number would certainly increase. But women know how dangerous it is to run away from home for any reason if there is no place of refuge nearby.

Still, there are about twenty-three shelters for women in the country as well as four WAW transitional houses for women who lack a safe home to return to when they leave shelters and prisons. This fact alone is extraordinary—the first shelter for women in the United States didn't open until 1972—as is the point that more could open if money were available. Every province in Afghanistan needs Family Guidance Centers (FGCs) and shelters. WAW FGCs house a staff of caseworkers and lawyers and contain rooms where families and their caseworkers and/or lawyers can meet to work out a resolution to their crises. The business of accessing justice for women takes place in FGCs.

When WAW opened its first facility in Kabul in 2007 and announced that we would welcome males in our counseling and mediation sessions—the fathers, husbands, brothers, and other men who violate women's human rights—most people warned us that this plan would defeat the project. Men wouldn't set foot in an FGC run by a women's organization, they said. But we went ahead anyway. Men came from the first day on. They need help too. And they did not interpret our services as Western.

After all, our entire staff of more than 620 people are local Afghans. We aren't foreign interlopers. We aren't practicing psychotherapy. We talk to men and families about women's rights in Islam, in other Muslim countries, in the Afghan constitution and conventions signed by Afghanistan. We talk about the damage the abuse of women inflicts on the country. We help them solve their problems. And we help women who have run away reintegrate with families that sign a legal document agreeing to cease their abuse and allow unannounced visits to their home for a year.

In addition to helping individual women and girls, WAW has provided training on women's rights to 250,000 Afghans from all walks of life, educated and uneducated rural and urban women and men in every province where we have an FGC shelter. People flock to these trainings and often ask for more.

While caseworkers and lawyers are working on their problems, women enjoy safety in our shelters. FGCs are open to the public but, for security, the shelters are hidden in other parts of town. Essential teaching takes place in them: literacy, math, and life skills classes on topics such as nutrition, child-rearing, hygiene, and women's rights in Islam. In most WAW shelters, there is vocational training in income-generating skills and a kindergarten for children accompanying their mothers. Other local grassroots women's rights organizations are just as successful. We all have the support of the majority of people, certainly many of the millions who risked their lives to vote in the recent elections.

If the Taliban Return

None of this work could have occurred without the presence of coalition troops. The Taliban threaten our staff every day and even kidnapped two WAW workers, whose lives were saved through the intervention of elderly, conservative Afghan men who admire our work and persuaded the captors to release them. The Taliban know that what we do to empower women to reject abuse defeats their objective, for the subjugation of 50 percent of the population is a direct route to controlling the country. It is not a religious principle.

This means that if the Taliban succeed in taking over the country when the coalition troops leave, as many expect them to try to do, the advances in women's rights will end and the subjugation will resume. Women and families who have availed themselves of our services and men and women who have worked for women's rights organizations will be severely punished, possibly murdered. The people must learn a lesson, and terror is the way to do it.

In this scenario, the world will once again be treated to photographs of women being beaten on the street because an ankle showed, and videos of women being executed in public arenas for minor infractions. We will learn that women doctors

are not allowed to practice and that women patients are forbidden to receive medical treatment from male doctors. Schools for girls will be burned to the ground and many teachers of girls will be killed. The Taliban have been killing them off for years. Stories like those that shocked the free world just over a decade ago will again flood the media. We know about the potential for these horrors, we know that the Afghan army may not be able to hold back the Taliban, yet we go ahead with the transition plan. And if it fails, if Afghanistan falls because it is not quite ready to assume its own defense, historians, politicians, journalists, and talking heads will develop an industry that attempts to explain what happened.

In not informing their citizens about the progress that has occurred in Afghanistan since 2001, especially about the significant progress on women's rights, the governments of the free world have made a mistake. Not trumpeting that success or explaining that it signifies the desire of the people for a stable democracy in an area of the world short on that type of government, not linking it to an advance in the rule of law, is an omission with serious consequences. The silence has actually added fuel to a widespread belief that Afghanistan is a worthless country. Ironically in spite of its problems, at the moment Afghanistan seems healthier and more peaceful than Iraq and Syria, and even Egypt.

WAW no longer feels alone as we did a few years ago when we were wringing our hands over rumors emanating from Washington about the plan to withdraw coalition forces. Now many people in the U.S. government, the military, think tanks, universities, and the media agree that it is unwise. They have reminded us that the West abandoned Afghanistan after the Soviets withdrew in 1989, leaving a power vacuum that resulted in a long civil war that saw the Taliban install its regime. They remind us that the country was wide open not only to the Taliban but to the Al-Qaeda terrorist group that launched the September 11 attacks and other atrocities. They remind us that we and millions of people in the Middle East are reaping the consequences of having withdrawn from Iraq far too soon and having left the country in the hands of an inexperienced and incompetent leader. They point to the increase in murders of Westerners and suicide bombers in Afghanistan; strong signs of Taliban and jihadist muscle flexing. There is little question that the Taliban have now infiltrated the entire country as coalition troops pack up to leave.

Since the United States made the decision to withdraw its troops, leaving only a small force to advise the Afghan army, events have occurred in the Middle East that severely complicate the situation. Lately, through the rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the jihadist movement has grown more powerful and dangerous than ever. Surely jihadist organizations, especially ISIS and Al-Qaeda (not as dead as we once thought), are keeping an eye on Afghanistan. The two organizations have a long

history with each other. An undefended or weakly defended Afghanistan will be a perfect base for one or both of them. Together or individually they can wreak havoc throughout the Middle East and beyond.

Women for Afghan Women has a personal interest in declaring that the fight against the subjugation of women in Afghanistan has made strong headway and that women's attainment of human rights is an essential component of the rule of law and a country's advance to democracy. We fear we might see our work and the work of other women's rights activists and organizations and the hopes of the Afghan people melt away in an inferno created by the Taliban or other power seekers. But regardless of what happens, we intend to continue. We have been working with and for the women of Afghanistan, but all along we have wanted the progress that this country has made to inspire women all over the world who are engaged in a similar struggle. It is a struggle against local misogyny and the misogyny of a world that keeps itself deaf to the point. Denying women universal human rights means denying their humanity. We ask the world not to ignore the meaning and importance of the progress we describe. Not to devalue it. And not to let it go.