

FOCUS ON AFGHANISTAN

AFGHAN WOMEN - BARGAINING WITH PATRIARCHY

“**O**ut go the Taliban, but will Afghan women be excluded again?” is the title of a comment by LaShawn Jefferson of the women’s rights division of Human Rights Watch. This is certainly the question posed by feminists, women’s groups and gender-conscious males around the world, who are watching the proceedings of the UN-sponsored conference in Bonn that started on November 27 to try and form a provisional government composed of the various forces in Afghanistan. History and politics, Joan Scott once said, “are enacted on the field of gender.” This has been particularly true of Afghanistan.

Although under the Taliban the situation of Afghan women sank to an all-time low — no girls’ schools or employment for women, no mobility and strict purdah for women who were also forbidden to leave home without a male relative. But was it always so? Many write about Afghanistan as if it were a totally primitive, backward tribal society, ruled by warlords, bandit chiefs and ferocious Mullahs — a case of classic tyranny and classic patriarchy. This is not, however, the total picture. The country has a history of moving one step forward and two steps back from the 1920s. Afghan women have a history of periods of advance on women’s rights, which they can draw upon today while in the process — in Deniz Kandyoti’s words—of “bargaining with patriarchy.”

Amanullah's Reforms

In 1919 Amanullah Khan united several tribes, seized the throne, and tried to modernize the country. Calling himself a revolutionary, King Amanullah developed close ties with Turkey, Iran and the Soviet Union. A proposed new constitution in 1923 gave voting rights to women, and Amanullah claimed that “the keystone of the future structure of the new Afghanistan will be the emancipation of women.” He introduced a Family Code in 1921 forbidding child marriage, encouraged girls’ schools, and banned polygamy for government employees. In 1928 his wife Queen Surayya appeared unveiled, and by decree, women were made to discard the veil. But unlike Turkey under Mustapha Atatürk where similar reforms were successful, the forces of tribal patriarchy and reaction prevailed in Afghanistan. Opposition to women’s rights and modernization set in and the King was deposed in 1929. His progressive reforms were annulled, but his rule was not forgotten and is cited by Afghan women even today.

Turn to the Left

In 1965 the women’s issue again came to the fore with the formation by Afghan intelligentsia of the People’s

Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). The PDPA was for a democratic government to liberate Afghanistan from feudal rule. Its demands included equal treatment for women and education for all. That year six women activists formed the Democratic Organization of Afghan Women (DOAW).

This organization aimed at doing away with female illiteracy, forced marriages and brideprice. As a result of this pressure women obtained the right to vote and four DOAW women entered parliament.

In 1978 the left-wing PDPA took power and introduced bold measures including land reform, cancelling rural debt and enforcing women’s rights. The latter included a limit on the traditional practices of marriages for cash, brideprice, forced marriages and early marriage. A minimum age of 16 for women and 18 for men was introduced along with compulsory education for girls. This was keenly resented by traditionalists and (as one observer noted) opposed “by Afghan men, whose male chauvinism is as massive as the mountains of the Hindu Kush.”

By 1979 there was organized opposition to the PDPA along with internal fighting. President Taraki was killed, succeeded by Hafizullah Amin who was killed and succeeded by Barak Karmal. Karmal ordered a gradualist approach to change, but attacks continued resulting in the Soviet invasion in December 1979, to protect the Afghan Communist government.

Soviet Invasion

In the period up to 1992 many changes took place in women’s status. Women entered government service, worked on airlines, radio and television, in hospitals, as teachers in schools and in the army. Many women had prominent positions in public life. In the 1980s 65% of students in Kabul University were women. The DOAW, renamed All-Afghan Women’s Council, was led by Massouma Esmaty Wardak, a member of parliament; other notable women were Soraya, director of the Afghan Red Crescent, Dr Soheila, Chief Surgeon of the Military Hospital, and Jamila Palwasha and Rubafza Kamyar, members of the Central Committee of the PDPA. There was also a Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), founded by the late Mina Kishwar Kamal in 1977, which now operates in exile in Pakistan.

The withdrawal of Soviet troops led to the downfall of the Communist government in Afghanistan, and the Taliban movement was supported by Pakistan, USA and Saudi Arabia. The powers

that intervened to help push the Soviet Union out of Afghanistan, showed no interest in that country's future. Tribal factionalism and civil strife further ruined the country. The result was massive reversals for women and their total exclusion from politics, from public life, from employment — making them invisible non-persons. The Taliban became internationally reviled for its atrocious treatment of women. All the earlier gains from the time of King Amanullah onward were erased and the Afghan intelligentsia and professionals fled into exile.

Hannah Papanek noted in 1989 that different regimes (in Afghanistan and Iran) have “used their specific stand on the ‘woman question’ as a way of signalling their political agenda.” Covering and uncovering women signified the political, economic and cultural projects of these regimes. Today again the issue has come to the fore. Iranian-born Valentine Moghadam, Professor of Sociology, has reminded us that broad-based and popular social movements in which women participate — as in Iran — do not mean an enhancement of women's status, and conversely a minority government or imposed government may emancipate women — as occurred in Afghanistan. She argues that events in Iran and Afghanistan in the 1980s show that social upheavals are “not only

about contention over political power and economic change (among men)” but are also about “definitions of culture and especially male-female relations.” In an interesting comparison of Iran and Afghanistan, Moghadam writes:

In Iran, the Islamic authorities saw a deep moral and cultural crisis exemplified in “the naked woman.” To solve the problem, woman had to be covered and domesticated. By contrast in Afghanistan, the secluded veiled woman was seen by the revolutionaries as exemplifying the country's backwardness; consequently women had to be educated and uncovered.

We read that the Afghan King's delegation to Bonn includes two women. This is a hopeful sign. Recently The UN Special Envoy on Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, met with Afghan women exiles in Pakistan who stressed the importance of women's participation in civil society and in the on-going negotiations. We hope that Brahimi will not let Afghan men persuade him that “national reconciliation” takes priority over women's rights. There can be no justice in Afghanistan unless women are free. ■

Courtesy *Cat's Eye*, 28, Nov. 2001.

RECLAIMING 23 LOST YEARS: TO SECURE AFGHANISTAN'S FUTURE, BRING BACK ITS WOMEN

Pamela Philipose

It's difficult to know where to begin when it comes to chronicling the immediate past of Afghanistan's women, just as it is difficult to know where to stop when it comes to fathoming the future. Only one thing can be said with certainty— if the country has to reclaim itself, its women will have to reclaim the present. Of course, all over the world a great deal of lip service is suddenly being paid to the cause, what with two famous wives— Laura Bush and Cherie Blair—recently participating in a worldwide campaign to focus on Taliban's brutality to women. But the evils of the Taliban regime are well known, what is not so familiar is the record of the Northern Alliance, which is not that much better. Its tolerance of music and barbers must not hide the fact that it comprises elements who would argue, like the Taliban do, that a woman's face is the source of all corruption. Afghan social activist, Fahima Vorgetts, put it this way, “Now people are listening to what we say about the Taliban but they must listen to what we say about the Northern Alliance to avoid future tragedy. We must not forget that the Northern Alliance committed so many atrocities during their rule between 1992 and 1996.”

The future then is a slippery slope, made more difficult by the legacy of the last two decades, when every major player—including the UN and the new champions of Afghan women, the US—thought nothing of bartering away women's rights on the altar of expediency.

While the UN kept compromising with the Taliban, until women were literally erased from the mindscape, the US's role was a particularly cynical one. At one point, even as Hillary Clinton was loudly berating the Taliban for their cruelty towards women, her husband was keeping his fingers crossed that the \$4.5 billion pipeline network that oil transnational Unocal wanted to build to carry Caspian Sea oil across Afghanistan would come through with the blessings of the Taliban. Only women's groups in the US had the courage to speak out against this.

As for Islamic nations, their record was not much better. Today most of them don't hesitate to point out that the Taliban's ways were unIslamic. Yet, as Ahmed Rashid points out in his book *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia*, most of them, with the partial exception of Iran, never bothered to issue a single statement on the need for women's education or human rights in Afghanistan. Nor did they ever question the Taliban's interpretation of the Sharia. In hindsight, the treatment meted out to Afghan women over the last two decades and more could figure as one of the great crimes against humanity of our times. There were atrocities committed when the Soviets ruled. Survivors of the December 1984 massacres in Chardara district of Kunduz spoke of Soviet soldiers disembowelling pregnant women with bayonets. Amnesty International has recorded eyewitness