

Rhetoric Versus Reality: Prospects for Women's Rights in Post-Taliban Afghanistan

Susan F. Cathcart

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Gerard Toal, Chair
Georgeta Pourchot

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Abstract

This paper examines roles of patriarchal structures in global geopolitics and state systems in marginalizing women's perspectives and experiences. Using Afghanistan as a case study it argues that, despite the discourse of increasing women's rights, these structures, which once rendered women invisible and which now seem focused on women's issues, remain indifferent to women's conditions. It shows how the rhetoric of women's liberation and gender equality is being used to obscure the reasons for ongoing U.S. military action in Afghanistan and camouflage barriers to women's rights caused by entrenched patriarchal norms.

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Introduction

Why did the world suddenly start caring about the lives of Afghan women? Long before the attacks of September 11, 2001, women's rights activists tried, with limited success, to draw attention to the Taliban's brutal policies toward women. Although the international community was aware of the harsh living conditions of most Afghan women, the situation apparently did not warrant strong action (force) until after the war against the Taliban and al Qaeda was underway.

Indeed, since the start of military actions in Afghanistan, representatives of the United States (including President and Mrs. Bush), the United Nations and Afghanistan have kept the liberation of Afghan women from the oppressive Taliban forces in the fore. Educational opportunities for Afghan girls (and boys), increased autonomy and economic opportunities for women, and constitutional guarantees of gender equality and political participation are touted as signs that democracy is sprouting in Afghanistan and, perhaps, catching on in the Middle East. According to the Bush administration, women's human rights in Afghanistan are "a foreign policy imperative and cornerstone of all human rights efforts in the region" (White House Press Office). Furthermore, the professed reason for U.S. and coalition action in Afghanistan has morphed from a hunt for terrorists to a war to liberate the Afghan people (especially women) from terrorist oppressors.

After years of being largely ignored by the world, this focus on improving the lives of Afghan women, at a minimum, shines a light on their varied, tremendous needs during the reconstruction process. For some women, life has improved and this rhetoric promises better future. But these words also conceal the real conditions experienced by most Afghan women. Human rights organizations, women's rights activists and media reports continue to document the structural and direct violence women and girls experience on a daily basis, in large part because of war-related environmental insecurities. Fundamentalist warlords who terrorized and oppressed women during and after the Soviet war - now members of the new government - are resisting new calls to increase women's human rights. Furthermore, entrenched patriarchal values and customs give men authority to police and discipline all aspects of women's lives. Reports indicate that some women's rights have actually *deteriorated* since the Taliban were ousted.

Using Afghanistan as a backdrop, this paper examines how patriarchal structures within global geopolitics and at the state level work to keep women on the periphery of power. I will show how these structures continue to marginalize the very women they claim to empower through liberation. The first part of this paper comprises a review literature that explains international relations from a feminist perspective, which provides an alternative to the more traditional (masculinist) approaches that have shaped U.S. foreign policy and international relations. To illustrate how feminist ideas are validated in the political science community, which informs policy makers, the second section provides a comparison of several accounts of Afghanistan's history and politics. The third part of the paper examines how the Bush administration's rhetoric presents the military action in Afghanistan as an act of liberation for Afghan women in order to legitimize the human and financial cost of its ongoing activities in Afghanistan. The persistence of patriarchal structures at the global and state level and their indifference to the conditions of Afghan women is the focus of the fourth section. First we consider how decisions based on masculinist ideas of state security and power have created an unsafe environment for most Afghan people, but especially

women. Then we will take a closer look at how Afghanistan's patriarchal state system conditions women's new political rights.

I. Gender and Geopolitics

In Cynthia Enloe's **Bananas, Beaches and Bases** (2000), there is a photograph taken at the Venice Summit in September 1987 (p. 8). As Enloe points out, former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher is conspicuous as the lone woman among the nine heads of state. This prompts Enloe to ask the question answered in remainder of the book, "Where are the women?"

It is a question that might come to mind when reading about attempts to modernize Afghanistan since its early statehood. Many books about Afghanistan's history focus on the political wrangling, internecine struggles and fighting that have gripped the country. As we will discuss in greater detail later, writers generally treat women as objects – of official policies, of cultural or of traditional practices – without acknowledging women's reactions or contributions to new laws, historic events or daily life. To the men who write about war, society and international relations in Afghanistan, it appears that women are invisible.

One reason for this, Enloe argues, is that to most international observers, "money, guns and the personalities of leaders – of the men who make up the political elite" are the defining elements of power. Most societies are arranged in such a way that it is men who have access to and the ability to gain these trappings of authority (p. 7). Historically, in most cultures women have been lumped together with children, considered incapable of the "decisiveness" required to conduct international politics (p. 4). Furthermore, ideas about masculinity and femininity have relegated most women to supporting or caretaker roles that prevent them from gaining the resources that would allow access to political circles (p. 16). Enloe suggests that "the world has been made with blunt power" and "sleights of hand" that depend on created, but seemingly natural, ideas about gender identity (p. 17).

Exposing these "artificial notions" and the elite they benefit may be the first step to changing the international system and creating space for varied interpretations about power and the effects of international relations (p. 17). In her examinations of the tourism industry, military culture, diplomatic corps, the banana trade and the garment industry, Enloe argues that gendered roles are created to maintain a hierarchy that keeps certain elite men at the top, often at the expense of women, children and non-elite men.

In **Global Gender Issues: Dilemmas in World Politics** (1999), Peterson and Runyan also probe how masculine and feminine identities are created and perpetuated at all levels. The authors argue that since Morgenthau (1949), international relations and political science have generally defined power in terms of "power-over," or the "ability to get someone to do what you want." This concept of power "emphasizes separations and competitions," as actors use their coercive resources to prevent others from gaining enough power to become a threat. Like Enloe, Peterson and Runyan assert, "power reckoning is embedded in sociocultural dynamics and values systems" that are hidden by their "emphasis on material resources and coercive ability" (p. 53).

Peterson and Runyan describe how social structures such as traditional religious, educational and judicial institutions force individuals to conform to gender stereotypes. By privileging men as natural power wielders and reinforcing hierarchal roles that prevent women from holding positions of authority or leadership, the "ideological and gendered division of public and private" is consistently reinforced from many points in society (p. 88). The authors observe that in societies that define women as wives and mothers whose

socioideologically identified space is the household or private sphere, women's opportunities for political action are "severely limited" (p. 102). Women in such traditional roles are politically constrained not only by the time and energy required to manage a household (frequently in addition to work outside the home) (p. 86), but also by gendered ideas about power that privilege those who have served in the military or excelled in the corporate world (p. 92).

At the international level, the authors say, "the pattern of male dominance in political institutions...is replicated in IGOs, governmental bureaucracies, and, especially, the increasingly powerful institutions of economic decision-making" (p. 79). Using the United Nations as an example, they note that the organization has made some progress since committing in 1985 to increasing its female professional staff to 30 percent by 1990, a goal it reached by 1991. Out of sixty possible undersecretaries-general positions available, only three were filled by women from 1972 to 1982, and twelve from 1993 to 1994 (p. 79); furthermore, only about 3 percent of 185 national missions are headed by women (p. 81). In short, at the international and national political levels women, who comprise about half of the world's population, are grossly underrepresented. Furthermore, they argue that myths about development that correlate literacy, education and paid employment levels to gender and political equality, often ignore other factors such as religion, militarism, electoral systems and colonial history which also impact gender relations (p.102).

This idea is illustrated in Eric Foner's **The Story of American Freedom** (1998), an exploration of how ideas about gender and race relations, liberty, and politics in the United States have changed over time. Foner reveals some of the political and socioideological machinations behind shifting ideas of liberty and rights for classes of citizens including women. Although the Declaration of Independence and the American Revolution "inextricably linked" freedom with the "idea of equality" (p. 16), Foner writes, "the Revolution did not undo the obedience to which male heads of household were entitled from their wives, children, employees and slaves" (p. 17). Rights and laws were based on essentialist beliefs about a "natural hierarchy of innate endowments" in which women and non-whites were considered innately incapable of moving beyond a childlike capacity for understanding politics, economics and the world at large. White men, on the other hand, could look forward to "an open-ended process of personal transformation, developing to the fullest potential inherent within each human being" (p. 71). Indeed, more than 140 years would pass before American women were granted the right to vote.

The American patriarchal society has been maintained over generations, Foner argues, by ideas such as the "cult of domesticity," which claimed to give women primary authority in the home, while men moved freely in the public sphere of the market and politics (p. 71). This myth was still alive and further perpetuated in 1959 during the famous "kitchen debate" between then vice-president Richard Nixon and Soviet premier Nikita Krushchev. Foner points out that Nixon's interchangeable use of the words "women" and "housewife," and his observation that an automatic floor sweeper eliminates the need for a wife "implied a particular role for women" (p. 271).

Foner's chronicle of American women's fight for rights in country that loudly proclaims its ideals of freedom and equality may be a cautionary tale for the women of Afghanistan. Even into the 1970s courts considered wives to be subservient to husbands and women's reproductive choices a matter of public policy. Court rulings such as *Griswold v. Connecticut*, and *Roe v. Wade*, which outlawed state prohibitions on contraceptives and validated women's rights to abortions, respectively, finally recognized "the family as a collection of individuals rather than a single unit with a single head" (p. 303). Still, efforts to

pass the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to remove obstacles “to the full participation of women in public life,” failed. Foner writes that conservative forces against the amendment mobilized men and women with claims “it would undermine the family” and “discredit the role of the wife and mother.” He claims that its defeat reveals that many American women choose to cling to traditional gender classifications, even those “condemned by feminists as obstacles to American freedom” (p. 318). ERA opponents, Foner concludes, “were fighting a rear guard action against an irreversible revolution in gender roles,” reasserting the traditional family unit as the sacred foundation of American society (p. 319). Unwittingly or not, women enlisted in the battle against the ERA reaffirmed dominance of the American patriarchal system.

II. Afghanistan’s Invisible Women: One State, Two Realities

As mentioned above, those who write about Afghanistan’s history generally overlook the influence and participation of women in shaping society. One might blame women’s absence from historical accounts on the strict seclusion of Afghan women required by tradition. But this explanation further objectifies women by denying they play any role even “behind the scenes.” In order to survive more than twenty years of conflict, one might assume that women became somewhat self-sufficient and had to move about in the public realm during the times men were off fighting or if their men were killed.

One of the most prolific and respected writers on Afghanistan’s history, Olivier Roy, consistently overlooks the roles of women in his works, confirming the claims of Enloe, Peterson and Runyan that men, money and weapons matter most. Roy writes as though women played no significant role in the history of Afghanistan or during its more than 20 years of war. In **Islam and Resistance in Afghanistan** (1990), Roy describes the cyclical processes of state modernization initiatives and rural rebellion that left the state devastated at the end of the twentieth century. Roy describes the origins of Afghanistan’s warrior culture as rooted in an eighteenth century tribal confederation “held together by the common aim of conquering neighboring areas” (p. 13). Frequently the state served as an enemy that brought rural or tribal groups together. Roy says this is because the tribes view the role of the state as a land administrator, while the state, under various rulers, has tried to assume a more central role (p. 14), usually through heavy-handed modernization policies that alienated the rural peasants and religious leaders (p. 16).

Roy explains the psychosocial behavior of “every Afghan” is directly related to his “belonging to a larger entity” such as a tribe, professional group, religious group, ethnic group, local community or family (p. 12). According to Roy, *Pashtunwali*, the tribal code practiced in (mostly) tribal zones is both ideology and common law that is in some ways at odds with *shari’a*, or Islamic law. For example, adultery requires a higher standard of proof according to *shari’a* than under *Pashtunwali*; according to *Pashtunwali* women are not allowed to inherit property because “that would contradict the principle of strict patrilineage” while the Koran allows women to inherit half of a male’s share (p. 36).

Interestingly, Roy mentions these differences without commenting on the disparity in rights between men and women. Indeed, the conspicuous absence of women in Roy’s account of Islamism in Afghanistan seems to validate feminists’ assertions that political science and international relations favor “masculinist” ideas of power and politics. He seems to deny that women had *ever* influenced society or historical events. Furthermore, Roy seems to view the limited role of Afghan women as inevitable when, (rightly) insisting on Islamism’s modernity, he calls the role of women Islamism’s “most controversial question,”

arguing that it “involves a cultural element which goes far beyond ...even Islam itself.” He then ignores the mutually reinforcing influences of culture, colonial history and religion on gender relations, claiming a need to distinguish between Muslim women’s position in traditional society and the way Islamism disciplines “urban, educated – and therefore emancipated women...to accept the dictates of Islam” (p. 8). Furthermore, Roy obscures the fact that men, not Islamism, are forcing women to comply with constructed rules designed to reinforce a specific, male-dominated hierarchy. Because of the scope of this paper, the role of Islam and Islamism in shaping gender identities will not be explored in any detail here.

Repression, Resistance and Women in Afghanistan (2002), by Hafizullah Emadi, exposes the hidden world of women during Afghanistan’s struggle with modernity in the twentieth century. Emadi details the Muslim woman’s position within the traditional society, revealing a patriarchal structure that “views women as inferior to men in both intellect and nature” (p. 31).

Afghanistan’s patriarchal traditions demand complete submission to men, with women subject to punishment – even death – for insubordination to male family members (p. 36). According to Emadi, women are considered “chattel to be sold and purchased by men” and that an “inculcated...concept of self-denial” runs so deep within the psychosocial makeup of women that most use their husbands’ or fathers’ names when introducing themselves (p. 31). In rural areas, politics and other public sphere activities are the “exclusive domain of men,” although there are a few women from important families who wield some influence behind the political scenes and even a couple who have served as local arbiters (p. 86).

Urban women experienced the benefits of modernization initiatives, especially under Prime Minister Daoud from 1953 to 1963. Emadi cites the introduction of women into the government service, a woman member of the United Nations delegation, and a movement by female royals and the wives of elites to change veiling requirements as proof of more liberal attitudes towards women’s status. (pp. 70-71). Under Daoud’s second term, women in Kabul had access to education including university. He established a committee to promote women’s causes and “encourage their participation in public affairs,” and directed government media to focus on family and women’s issues including socioeconomic development. Daoud also set up a family court in Kabul that was headed by a woman. According to Emadi, women also joined the military and police forces and served in the ministries of defense and interior (p. 98).

More important to this discussion, Emadi describes the roles that women have played in Afghanistan’s civil and revolutionary struggles. For example, Emadi claims that “women were the first to mobilize” against the repressive modernization strategies of the pro-Soviet PDPA regime. By taking advantage of their marginalized position and traditional, private sphere they were able to organize and share their intelligence (p. 103). The Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), which Roy does not mention, mobilized women in opposition to Soviet invasion and occupation. RAWA organized protests among female high school and university students as well as women workers in Kabul igniting the violence that spread to outlying regions (p. 110). Contrary to Roy’s assertion that in the war against the Soviets, “there were no women fighters” (Roy 1994:158), Emadi identifies women who fought alongside men against Soviet occupiers, observing that women had participated in national liberation struggles “as far back as...1880” (2002: 114).

Why were Afghan women largely invisible during more than 20 years of fighting? Enloe might argue that patriarchal attitudes among international commentators cause them to dismiss women's experiences as "natural" and unimportant to telling the story (p. 3). Observing Afghanistan's many conflicts through the lenses of traditional gender identities and relations, men are considered strong primary actors defending their land, way of life, women, children, etc., while women remain in the background (p. 12). This attitude carries over into international relations, creating a hierarchy among states where the experience of less powerful states is also dismissed and the impact of violence on of the least powerful people is off the global radar screen.

III. Women's Rights and the Rhetoric of Freedom

"What we hear and do not hear about the world we occupy is no accident... Shaping knowledge, and a lack of knowledge, constitutes a basic element of power. Silences – spheres where knowledge has been kept from public awareness – are undeniably political."

(Nordstrom, 1998: 81)

Human and women's rights activists were excited at the initial buzz about improving conditions of women in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Since the mid-1990s women's rights organizations had been trying, with limited success, to raise awareness about the problems facing Afghan women in Taliban country (McMorris 2002; Nojumi 2002; Skaine 2002). Then a couple of weeks after the September 11, 2001 attacks, CNN rebroadcast *Beneath the Veil*, a British documentary expose of the Taliban's cruel policies toward women, attracting some five million viewers. This opened a floodgate of personal and media reports on Afghan women and the efforts of their activist supporters (McMorris 2002).

No longer invisible, Afghan women's issues became the top humanitarian priority of the Bush administration. While this rhetoric has helped focus attention and aid on the very real needs of Afghan women, it has also obscured direct and structural violence caused by the ongoing conflict. Using a discourse of freedom and Afghan women's liberation, the Bush administration was able to "repackage" the conflict in Afghanistan from a hunt for terrorists to a war of liberation (a pattern that was repeated in Iraq). This helped to justify the costs (human and financial) of ongoing involvement there as part of America's duty as the "defender of freedom." Moreover, it legitimized the strategic extension of hegemonic power in the name of global security and universal human rights.

There is little question the administration had to take strong action against those who carried out the deadly attacks of September 11. There was no mention of liberation when the President announced the military air strikes that kicked off the ongoing military action in Afghanistan (George W. Bush October 7, 2001). The most "the oppressed people of Afghanistan" were promised October 7, 2001, were airdrops of food medicine and supplies. Bush was careful to point out that the U.S. was a friend of the Afghan people. It was al Qaeda terrorists and the Taliban he was after, as "part of our campaign against terrorism." Our "peaceful nation" was forced into this fight because "in a world of sudden terror... the only way to pursue peace is pursue those who threaten it." Referring to the military operation's name, Operation Enduring Freedom, he declared, "We defend not only our precious freedoms, but also the freedom of people everywhere to raise their children free from fear" (George W. Bush October 7, 2001).

While the President continued to focus on the war and the threat of al Qaeda and the Taliban (what Campbell describes as the "discourse of danger" (1998: 48)), Laura Bush

began to speak out about the Taliban's treatment of women and efforts to improve conditions for Afghan women.

November 17, 2001 marked Laura Bush's using the President's weekly radio address to "kick off a world-wide effort" focusing on al Qaeda's brutality against Afghan women and children. She called "the fight against terrorism...a fight for the rights and dignity of women." She cited the "brutal oppression of women as the central goal of the terrorists," observing that "only terrorists and the Taliban would threaten to pull out a woman's fingernails for wearing nail polish." Mrs. Bush claimed that, "recent military gains" meant "women are no longer imprisoned in their homes" (Laura Bush 2001).

Why, after more than five years of brutality under the Taliban, was the welfare of Afghan women suddenly worth fighting for? Contextually, this message was broadcast to Americans who were entering the holiday season during the early stages of what promised to be a long and unconventional war. The media was also reporting rising numbers of Afghan civilian deaths due to particularly tragic mistakes, such as the air attack on a wedding party that killed dozens, including children and women (Glasser 2002). Considered in this light, it appears that the point of this radio address was to build and maintain the support of American women for the war and provide a humanitarian imperative for continued military action and sacrifice beyond simple revenge for the attacks of September 11 (Woodward 2002). Laura Bush was chosen to deliver this message, perhaps because of her "maternal authority" (real as a mother and teacher, and symbolic as "first lady"), which Scheper-Hughes (1998) asserts is often called upon to create and maintain the idea of "acceptable death" during wartime and political conflict (p. 231). By pointing out the harm done by the Taliban to long-suffering Afghan women, the sacrifice of innocent lives (and that of soldiers) in the course of the war could be seen as justified in order to rid the world of the terrorists' greater evil.

In the months and years to come, Laura Bush continued to carry many of the administration's messages of Afghan (and later Iraqi) women's liberation often combined with hopeful messages about American values. In March 2002, she addressed the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women on International Women's Day, affirming "our mission to protect human rights for women in Afghanistan," and the universal entitlement to "human dignity, private property, free speech, equal justice, education and health care" (Laura Bush March 8, 2002). She stated that the "world is helping Afghan women return to lives they once knew" in the professions of law, medicine and teaching.

A couple of months later, Laura Bush broadcast a message of comfort and encouragement to Radio Free Afghanistan, acknowledging the multitude of economic and infrastructural "difficulties" facing them, yet relating the world's happiness at seeing children return to school and "women moving freely outside their homes." She recalled images of Afghans "smiling and singing and laughing" as Americans, coalition members and Afghan "fellow countrymen" liberated them from "the brutal oppression of the Taliban regime." Mrs. Bush cited many efforts underway by U.S. governmental and non-governmental agencies to "improve lives in Afghanistan" through education and training programs and by providing basic community services. Although she urged women to participate in the decisions that will shape the future state, she did not implore men to increase women's autonomy. In closing she expressed confidence that America will be Afghanistan's "friend and partner" in achieving a "future of peace and freedom" (Laura Bush May 21, 2002).

Introducing her husband at an event to mark progress in global women's human rights in March 2004, Mrs. Bush called the (fictional) Afghan-made movie "Osama" a "sobering reminder of what life was like under the Taliban" and reason "why all of us are

committed to helping all women gain equal rights” (Laura Bush, March 12, 2004). She claimed to be “proud to be part of America’s efforts to advance the rights of Afghan women and girls” (Laura Bush March 12, 2004).

But focusing on the most obvious signs of Western-style progress – guaranteed political rights, schools opening, large scale job programs specifically for poor women – does not address the structural problems that continue to prevent most Afghan women from living full lives. For example, Mrs. Bush’s radio address to the Afghan people does not challenge the gender inequality embedded in Afghan society. She also promotes American values and democracy as the universal norms, presenting Western-style modernization as *the* natural choice for Afghanistan, when it is actually being imposed on the state by global geopolitical structures.

President Bush’s closing remarks at the event described above further illustrate this point:

“These are extraordinary times, historic times. We’ve seen the fall of brutal tyrants. We’re seeing the rise of democracy in the Middle East. We’re seeing women take their rightful place in societies that were once incredibly oppressive and closed. We’re seeing the power and the appeal of liberty in every single culture. And... - this nation is proud to – advance the cause of human rights and freedom.”
(George W. Bush March 12, 2004)

Based on President Bush’s choice of words, one might believe that the tyrants fell and democracy sprouted spontaneously – willed, perhaps by the “appeal of liberty” rather than as the result of an invasion by a state (or coalition) with a superior military force. He ignores the point that the question of what constitutes a woman’s “rightful place” has not yet been settled in the U.S. much less Middle East states (Foner 1998: 319). Mr. Bush nonetheless asserts that by “pursuing a forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East,” liberty will “arrive” and women will benefit from the resulting free society (George W. Bush March 12, 2004). Ignoring the very real security threats that face Afghan women he claims that they no longer live in fear or silence, he touts the Afghan constitution’s guarantee of gender equality without considering Afghanistan’s historical troubles with “modernizing” initiatives related to women’s empowerment.

As we saw, there was no mention of a “strategy of freedom” when the war began. In fact, the idea of Afghan liberation only began work its way into the discourse of the war after it was well underway. At a gathering marking the six-month anniversary of the September 11 al Qaeda attacks, President Bush praised an Australian airman killed in Afghanistan. He “honored” the young man’s “bravery in a noble cause,” part of which “was to liberate the Afghan people from terrorist occupation, and we did so” (George W. Bush March 11, 2002).

From here, we see a shift in the discourse of the war in Afghanistan from the hunt for terrorists to a deliberate act of liberation. In his April 8, 2002 remarks in Tennessee, President Bush claimed that, thanks to the military coalition, “we have freed the people of Afghanistan from one of the most repressive regimes in the history of mankind.” He further explained that by rebuilding the ruined state, the U.S. is “willing to commit resources to a free nation” (George W. Bush April 8, 2002). And on Women’s Equality Day, he credited the coalition with liberating Afghanistan and also restoring “fundamental human rights and freedoms to Afghan women” including young girls attending school for the first time (George W. Bush August 23, 2002). Speaking about humanitarian efforts in Afghanistan in October 2002, Bush said, based on what was “seen in Afghanistan that the road to freedom is the only one worth traveling,” pledging respect, support and friendship to nations that sacrifice to “build a future of liberty” (George W. Bush October 11, 2002).

Beginning in the spring of 2004, perhaps in an effort to win over women voters in the U.S. and shore up support for the ongoing, costly wars against insurgents in Afghanistan and Iraq, George Bush started emphasizing the ways Afghan women have benefited from their new freedom. On March 19, he asserted that Afghan people were “a world away from the nightmare of the Taliban” (George W. Bush March 19, 2004), and in the following weeks and months he continually repeated variations of the “young girls now to school, many for the first time” message (George W. Bush March 30; April 19; April 20; June 15, 2004), mentioned constitutionally guaranteed equality for women (George W. Bush March 30; May 18, 2004), and drew comparisons to women’s conditions under the Taliban (“viciously oppressed,” beaten for apparel infractions, denied employment opportunities, afraid) and under Karzai (fearlessly participating in the public sphere, exercising their rights). As Afghan and U.S. elections drew closer, Mr. Bush cited high voter registration – more than 10 million total including 4 million women – as a sign that democracy was thriving in Afghanistan (George W. Bush, September 21; August 10, 2004).

Through discourse President Bush was able to change the primary reasons for the war from a vengeful hunt for terrorists to a war of liberation so that “little girls can go to school for the first time” and women can vote in elections. Framing the conflict as America leading the international community in converting repressive, evil regimes to democratic governments justifies the costs of the war(s) to Americans as necessary in defense of freedom. But it also disguises an opportunistic grab for power and extension of hegemony in an important geopolitically strategic region as part of a larger “strategy of freedom for the Middle East.”

This perceived consensual Western modernization of economic, social and political systems in Arab and Islamic states is reminiscent of “Great Game” colonial machinations to control regional resources and transportation routes (Brzezinski 1997). Although symbols of democracy such as elections and working women figure prominently, they serve mostly to legitimize the patriarchal structures behind the Westernizing process. The situation in Afghanistan indicates ambivalence to any results beyond obvious, superficial change.

Even accepting administration claims there is still much to be done to address women’s issues in Afghanistan, assertions about Afghan women’s liberation appear to be greatly exaggerated. Women’s activists, reporters and human rights observers cite widespread depression caused by domestic violence at the hands of husbands and male relatives (North 2004); “Taliban-like restrictions” imposed on women by warlords (Frank 2004; AI 2003; HRW 2003); and men exercising tight control over women’s personal and political autonomy. These behaviors were endorsed by President Karzai on International Women’s Day when he appealed to men to allow their womenfolk to register to vote and reminded them that they could “control who she votes for” (Ingalls and Kolhatkar 2004).

Furthermore, according to UNICEF, only about 32 percent of the more than 3.5 million school children are girls. Human Rights Watch reports that millions of girls are not enrolled with some areas reporting as low as 3 percent girls’ participation, primarily because families fear sexual violence, kidnapping or assault (HRW 2003). Dozens of girls’ schools have been firebombed. And in some areas, women teachers are paid less than males and subject to extreme forms of sexual harassment (Afghans for Civil Society 2003).

One representative of a human rights organization said of the Bush administration, “They have failed, misguided and betrayed Afghan women by giving them false hope,” and even accused them of using Afghan women as an excuse to remove the Taliban from power (Frank 2004). Ingalls and Kolhatkar (2004) claim that the administration uses “broad statistics to paint a rosy picture” of Afghanistan’s political environment which is “controlled

by U.S.-backed warlords and a U.S.-backed president, [and] remains extremely hostile to women.” Funding priorities for women are one example: according to the State Department, roughly \$11 million was allocated to women’s assistance programs in 2004. Compare this to the \$300 million earmarked for Pakistan’s military next year to fight al Qaeda along its border with Afghanistan, the allocated \$400 million to fund the Afghan Army, the \$780 million requested to thwart the heroin trade (AP 2004).

This disparity in funding indicates ambivalence on the part of the Bush administration and the international community. While the rhetoric expresses a desire to improve women’s conditions, supporting the war (and regional dominance) appears to be more important (Coleman 2004a). Dependence on assistance from local Afghan fighters, including cooperation from regional commanders and warlords, in the ongoing fight against Taliban and al Qaeda forces trumps women’s rights on the ground. Furthermore, history shows that increased demands for women’s rights could lead to a backlash against the perceived imposition of Western values on traditional society, possibly inciting an all out war between coalition and Afghan fighters.

As we have seen, although liberation and women’s rights figure prominently in the rhetoric and discourse of the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, actions indicate ambivalence (and perhaps indifference) to the real human rights situation. Professed desires to improve women’s lives in Afghanistan by expanding democracy are being used to mask the blatant plays for regional power by international actors.

Rather than facilitating real change, elite actors at the global level are reinforcing existing patriarchal structures that privilege powerful, Western states over weaker developing states, and at the state level men over women. These ideas will be explored in more detail in the next section.

IV. Patriarchal Structures

“Gender politics of Afghan regimes had never been an international concern, despite abuse of women’s rights by mujahidin and others.” (ICG Report 2003)

In this section we will examine how patriarchal norms – privileging masculine ideas about power and gender roles – supporting global and state power structures continue to marginalize Afghan women despite claims of empowerment. First we will look at how decisions taken by the U.S.-led coalition to work with local fighters and selectively wield its influence over Afghan allies is causing women to experience direct and indirect violence. Then we shine the spotlight on ways that entrenched patriarchal norms in the Afghan state system and culture work together to frustrate progress toward greater autonomy and equal rights for Afghan women despite constitutional guarantees. We will see that behind the rhetoric of equality, Afghan women largely remain politically restricted.

Geopolitics and Afghanistan

Peterson and Runyan (1999) claim that power is conventionally defined as “power-over” or “the ability to get someone to do what you want,” and is usually based on the ability to control resources “especially those supporting physical coercion” (p. 53). In most societies structural processes are designed to provide the men the greatest opportunities to “accumulate money, control weaponry and become public personalities” (Enloe 2000: 7), reinforcing traditional gender stereotypes that suggest that men are “appropriate political agents,” and women are not (Peterson and Runyan 1999: 84). Although women have been

making political gains over time, Reardon (1998) notes that women are still “shockingly underrepresented in the halls of power,” and further claims that “patriarchy prevails in all states and...manifests itself in the international system” (p. 289). When “[w]eaponry is the main determinant of power in the international state system” (Reardon 1998: 290), it creates an environment that fosters competition among nations to control scarce resources and invest in the best and or the most advanced weapons in the name of protecting national interests, to gain greater prestige, increase perceived power or at least maintain the status quo (Reardon 1998; Peterson and Runyan 1999).

This focus on security in terms of military power, for defense or offense, may hide or create “systemic insecurities” or “structural violence” such as disease, unemployment, illiteracy, racism and sexism that are more likely to impact the quality of women’s lives than men’s (McKay 1998). Additionally, during conflict women are subjected to various forms of direct violence, including death, rape, torture and physical abuse. According to Peterson and Runyan,

“The macho effects of military activities, the objectifying of military technologies, and the violent effects of military spending interact, escalating not only arms races but also direct and indirect sexual violence.” (1999: 56)

There is no question that Afghan women suffered both direct and indirect violence at the hands of the Taliban. But there is little mention of ongoing direct and structural violence experienced by Afghan women as the result of the U.S.- led coalition’s decision to join forces with local militias. The U.S.’s selective use of coercive power over local troops and other international structures, such as the U.N. and NATO, in pursuit of America’s security and geopolitical objectives demonstrates indifference to the consequences its actions on Afghan civilians, especially women.

In order to preserve its own human and financial resources, the U.S.-led coalition relies on Northern Alliance troops and local militias for ground support in the fight against the Taliban and al Qaeda, creating an unstable, insecure environment in areas outside of Kabul. As Taliban forces withdrew from villages, local anti-Taliban fighters seized control of “liberated” areas, assuming control of government facilities with no objection from U.S. or coalition forces. As a result, by November 2001 “warlords or their representatives occupied almost every province’s governorship” (HRW 2003: 16). Instead of a liberating experience most Afghans traded one corrupt, oppressive leader for another. Many Afghan people outside of Kabul now find themselves under the authority of former militia commanders who continue to challenge the authority of the central government.

Although the U.S. has pledged support to President Karzai and the Afghan people to help establish a rule of law and equal rights for all, including women, it has been reluctant to commit large numbers of troops to the project. It has also limited the number of stabilization or peacekeeping forces in the outlying provinces (BBC News December 12, 2003). In October 2003 the U.N. Security Council expanded the area covered by the International Security Assistance Force at the request of the interim government, but NATO could not secure troop commitments from member states. With little opposition (and in some cases support from the U.S. military), warlords, soldiers and armed groups have “perpetrated serious human rights abuses in the areas they controlled” including kidnapping and abduction of women, girls, and boys, confiscating land and property, rape and force conscription of men and boys (AI 2004). Indeed, U.S. Human Rights Watch (2003) reports that security concerns restrict women and girls from leaving home to go to school, shop, visit relatives, access healthcare or anything else that involves leaving home or being out in public.

In Afghanistan, language of liberation aside, the global geopolitical power structures at work are largely indifferent to their effects on women and other powerless civilians. Selecting local allies based on traditional/masculine ideas of power gave already powerful warlords and militia leaders even greater advantages over other citizens, including increased access to money, weapons and personal power. At the international level, the U.N. sanctioned the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan. The U.N. and NATO also complied with superpower United States' requests to limit peacekeeping and nation building forces mainly to Kabul. It appears that at the global level pursuit of power and security objectives overrules all other considerations including establishing a stable government that respects women's and human rights.

State Barriers to Equality

“Although Abigail Adams, like many women during her time – and since, I might add – handled the domestic duties, she believed that women should have an active role in developing our young nation. As her husband helped to establish our democracy, she wrote to him and said, “In the new code of laws, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors.”” (Laura Bush March 12, 2004)

“To John Adams, this egalitarian upheaval, including his wife's claim to political freedom, was an affront to the natural order of things.” (Foner 1998: 17)

Afghanistan's patriarchal system survived several modernization attempts during the twentieth century, most involving increasing women's freedoms and relaxing requirements to wear the veil. Despite their liberation from the oppressive Taliban and, contrary to the rhetoric of the Bush administration, in general, Afghan women still live tightly controlled and dangerous lives. Although the Afghan constitution considers women equal to men, in practice, women are running into obstacles trying to exercise their political rights.

The foundation of Afghanistan's patriarchal system is an androcentric paradigm based on the “common belief that maleness is the natural order of things.” That is, the male God created women after men, ordering them to obey and submit to men because of man's natural superiority, according to Emadi (2002). Islamic traditions require men to both support and discipline women (p. 30). The discourse of Islamist culture “features an uncompromisingly authoritarian construction of identity of ideal” women, family and society (Othman 1998: 180). Power, wielded with “religious legitimacy and authenticity,” is used to control the behavior of women by limiting autonomy “by imposing conformity through the power of identity and the politics of that identity” (p. 180). Emadi points out, in Afghanistan ideas about women's roles (and men's) are based on “tribal culture mores and religious precepts as understood by men” (2002: 30), but as Othman (1998) argues, these are not necessarily fixed over time and may be challenged by economic, social, political or other forces that affect men and women in a society.

The new constitution, in accordance with the December 2001 Bonn Agreement, recognizes equality among all Afghan citizens, allows both men and women to participate in elections as voters and candidates, and requires that 25 percent of seats in government are set aside for women. But, as Waylen observes,

“Institutional democratization does not necessarily entail a democratization

of power relations in society at large, particularly between men and women." (in Wilford and Miller 1998: 193)

Afghanistan's early brushes with democracy demonstrate that patriarchal attitudes, values and gender norms remain in place, hindering women's full participation in government council meetings, influencing their ability to vote, and frustrating chances to make a difference through political participation.

The U.S. Department of State proclaimed the "full participation of Afghan women in the Afghan national election... will be an early measure and important measure of their readiness to return to... political leadership" (USDS June 22, 2004). But a more important factor to measure is whether men are ready to accept women in positions of political leadership. Events at the summer 2002 *loya jirga* indicate that traditional power structures that privilege local strong men (warlords) and tribal leaders remain intact. According to a July 8, 2002 Washington Post article written by a female delegate who attended the *loya jirga*, women there experienced "discrimination and harassment" from the warlords in the new government, as well as threats to their physical security. For example, Sima Simar, the former minister of women's affairs was labeled the "Afghan Salman Rushdie" in a local newspaper and received "public threats by speakers at the *loya jirga*." Even the woman who ran for president against Hamid Karzai, Masooda Jalal, was a "target of systemic intimidation" (Ahmadi 2002). Another woman "had to go into the protection of the U.N., and received death threats" for carrying out her duties as a designated council representative by publicly confronting warlords in the assembly. An angry "group of extremists" was prevented from physically attacking her after she demanded criminal prosecution of those who committed human rights abuses against Afghan citizens (St. John 2004: 34). Observers were more troubled when the *moderate* chairman of the Constitutional *Loya Jirga* told the women representatives that "under Islamic law they are only worth half that of a man and... should know their place" (Coleman, 2004b). Indeed, women's rights "proved to be one of the most contentious issues during the Constitutional *Loya Jirga*" (Coleman, 2004b). Ahmadi, the woman delegate, notes that such public threats to women test the Bush administration's and the international community's professed commitment to women's rights.

Internalized patriarchal values also affect how women vote. According to registration workers, many illiterate women who registered to vote were not clear on what exactly they were doing; some women registered with the understanding that male relatives could vote for them, other women were punished by male relatives for registering and some who registered weren't sure they could get permission to vote (Waldman 2004). A significant number of respondents (72 percent) in a public opinion survey conducted in Afghanistan by the Asia Foundation this summer said that men should "advise" women selecting candidates and 87 percent said women would have to get permission from their husbands to vote (Ingalls and Kolhatkar 2004; Baillet 2004). On the other hand, men in the Hazara communities encourage high political participation among their women to make up for its minority status (Coleman 2004b). Depending on how this works in practice it could be good for women's rights, but it could raise nationalist identity issues and have negative consequences for ethnic relations down the road.

Peterson and Runyan (1999) argue that while proportional representation and quota systems facilitate women's access to political power, in order to fully recognize their full potential such systems "must be embedded in a culture committed to equality." In addition, there must be "strong political leadership and social pressure, which are less likely where conservative (traditional patriarchal) forces are strong" (p. 100). And unless Afghan women politicians can raise their numbers over time, they may not have the capacity to improve

conditions for other women: the constitutional mandate puts the minimum level of female representation at 25 percent, but a study by the U.N. Division for the Advancement of Women shows that 30 to 35 percent is the magic number “necessary for women to confidently champion women’s needs and priorities.” In lesser numbers, women and feminist issues are not taken seriously and are treated as “marginal voices” (Peterson and Runyan 1999: 97).

Another problem with constitutionally mandated equality is that it must be reconciled with Islamic law. In fact, “no law can be contrary to the provisions and beliefs of the sacred religion of Islam” (Afghan Constitution, Article 3). If, as Othman (1998) asserts, culture provides the “ideological principle for the application of rules laws” and especially religious values (p. 177), will courts continue to reinforce well-established patriarchal values and roles out of habit, respect for Islamic tradition, or the fear of the consequences of gender equality? Some activists are concerned that a “judicial system that is in shambles” will be the location of the battle for women’s rights (St. John 2004:32). It certainly didn’t bode well when the chief justice of the Supreme Court tried to have a presidential candidate expelled from the race for questioning Islamic divorce policies. Coleman (2004b) argues that conservative judges will probably not be inclined to liberal interpretations favorable to women’s claims to equality.

Although Afghan women were granted equality under the constitution, the entrenched patriarchal society presents barriers to exercising rights commensurate with that status. Women are having a hard time gaining acceptance and respect in government sessions. Women’s internalized ideas about identity and gender roles are reinforced by men’s efforts to police most aspects of their lives, limiting their political choices. Proportional representation is a good idea, but studies show that the 25 percent floor may be too low to earn them respect within the governing body, let alone effect any change in women’s conditions in the short term. Depending on how the judiciary system evolves, it may provide some relief for women, but the outlook for now is not promising.

Conclusion

“The women of Afghanistan are gaining greater rights, and their solidarity is an inspiration to women worldwide, especially the women of Iraq.”

(Laura Bush, March 12, 2004)

“In 2001, after the fall of the Taliban, improving the rights of women was at the top of the international agenda. In 2004, despite many well-intentioned programmes for women, women’s human rights appear to be more of an afterthought”

(Human Rights Watch 2003)

In Afghanistan, men and women have an opportunity to finally change the social power structure that has historically been a source of division and discontent. Although this paper deals with women’s rights, it is important to consider men’s rights also, since men and women will have to live cooperatively if the “new” state is to survive. It appears that Afghan men are chafing at the idea of losing control over “their” women, and that generally, women are uncomfortable challenging their traditional identities. Roles, which they may find comfortable but many Western women find oppressive.

Patriarchal structures of global geopolitics are indifferent to the complex, and sometimes obscured, cultural, religious and social issues that influence gender relations in Afghanistan. As we have seen, simply proclaiming women and men equal and giving them the opportunity to vote does not automatically produce a free and democratic system. Cloaking interstate violence and other forms of coercive power in the language of freedom has justified the direct and indirect violence to civilians, especially women, as part of the cost of liberty. Focusing on money, guns and other aspects of power, along with visible, symbolic aspects of normalcy (e.g., kids returning to school, national elections), discourages deeper examination of the root causes of Afghanistan’s struggles with Western-style modernization.

Increasing women’s autonomy in Afghanistan’s traditional patriarchal society has been historically contentious. As the IRC (2003) notes, sustainable gender mainstreaming is not going to happen as long as female segregation remains the norm. They warn that rushing to produce “immediate visible signs of women’s progress” may create a backlash against Western imposed values in a society that treasures (male) independence. There is also reason to question the commitment of President Karzai and government officials to women’s rights. Women are mandated to participate in government, but it appears that men are not required to respect them or honor their contributions. Women need men’s permission to exercise their constitutional right to vote. Conservative judges appear poised to make conservative interpretations of Islamic law, which may further obstruct the path to women’s equal justice.

Ultimately it will be up to Afghan women, with assistance from the international community, to challenge the patriarchal society from within (Emadi 2002, Othman 1998). History has shown that top-down initiatives breed distrust and rebellion among religious and tribal leaders. Outside forces demanding change in traditional gender relations will likely face similar resistance. Building a strong women’s movement through grassroots networking across ethnic lines may prove the most effective way for women to gain greater rights. Women have used their private spheres to organize and mobilize to their advantage in the past and continue to do so. Women’s radio programs that address issues such as literacy, domestic violence, health care and nutrition may provide rural women (and men) with a greater awareness of their entitlements and the resources available to them (Coleman 2004b). This might lay a foundation for a multi-ethnic women’s movement that could seriously

challenge restrictive behaviors imposed by men in the name of tradition. It could help men understand the way their behaviors impact women's lives, which might alter traditional Afghan gender relations.

The international community, especially the United States could use more coercive power to pressure Karzai and other men in the government to recognize the equality granted to women by the constitution. Since there is concern about creating a backlash if too much pressure is applied the government should promote and fund gender sensitivity training among men and women to raise awareness of oppressive behaviors. Men use (very real) security concerns as justification for restricting women's mobility, so expanding and expediting the recruiting and training of public safety officers, especially women, may provide another opening to greater autonomy for women. Secure public transportation, especially school buses for rural children would remove one barrier to girls' education.

Promoting gender equality and women's rights, if that is truly an objective of the military involvement in Afghanistan, is a complex issue and cannot be solved by rhetoric of liberation and unenforceable proclamations. However well intentioned discussions about improving Afghan women's rights may be, patriarchal norms at the global and local levels work against any progress by privileging traditional ideas about power as force and security as power over. And so, while the United States and the international committee espouse universal values of equality, obscured issues such as religion, culture and history continue to heavily influence gender issues in Afghanistan and may ultimately define freedom for Afghan women

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