
Afghanistan's Missing Link: Women Leaders

Afghan women can't be left out of the negotiations concerning the future of Afghanistan. Both President Obama and President Ghani need to address the historic role of the United States in perpetuating the abject status of Afghan women.

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As part of building the future relationship between the United States and Afghanistan's new leaders, President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah, President Barack Obama should do more than just negotiate troop levels and security for Afghanistan. He should also put Afghan women's fate on the negotiating table, where, in truth, it has never seriously been. Sitting prominently at that table should be Afghanistan's new First Lady, Rula Ghani.

In preparing for a serious conversation about the future of Afghan women's status and rights, the president should do two things that neither he nor his predecessor has yet done: Recognize, learn from, and address the historic role of the United States in perpetuating the abject status of Afghan women; and identify, tap, and engage with current and past women leaders — judges, doctors, NGO executives, academics and activists, as well as the first lady — to develop appropriate strategies for increasing Afghan women's and girls' health, well-being, social status, and educational and employment opportunities.

While I'll be discussing these two points and others at an [event at New America](#) in Washington, D.C. next week, it's worth diving into the details here, first.

Taking responsibility for the United States' role in exacerbating Afghan women's abject status and victimization over decades involves recognizing how American governments sacrificed those women's rights to U.S. interests. For example, when U.S. officials decided to empower anti-reform "freedom fighters" in Afghanistan, including Osama bin Laden, in order to oppose the Soviets, they knew their choice eliminated literacy campaigns, efforts to end feudal control over women and marriage, and the equal education of men and women in Afghanistan. They also knew that their anti-Soviet rhetoric would further taint women's rights in Afghanistan by labeling them as Communist. When the U.S.- backed mujahedeen wreaked carnage and destruction in the early 1990s, including extreme forms of violence against women, many officials considered it collateral damage. Even when the Taliban were spawned from this mayhem, as Pakistani Pashtuns manipulated their close ties with Pashtun Afghan leaders to expand their control across Afghanistan starting in 1994, the United States left them unopposed until 2001, despite their well-publicized draconian treatment of women.

Post-2001, the U.S. government did nothing to prevent misogynist former warlords from serving in the new Parliament, selected a central leader with warlord associations, and failed to build long-lasting social justice institutions. The United States also spent much of its reconstruction money on American sub-contractors, who built schools for girls or instructed Afghan women on skills with questionable application to their lives and little local input or lasting benefit. Even the schools proved ephemeral, as half of them — often built in places inaccessible to the very girls they were designed to serve — were destroyed by 2006.

After owning up to this past, American policy makers should learn about the thirty-year history of women's activism in Afghanistan, which offers proof that women's rights and social justice are not solely a Western idea. Indeed, by 2001, dozens of local women's and democracy organizations were promoting women's education and legal rights, enlightened views of Islam, and economic survival. Many worked covertly, often from exile, through the 1990s: the Afghan Women's Network, Humanitarian Assistance for the Women and Children of Afghanistan, the Revolutionary Association for the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), the Islamic Center for Political and Cultural Activities of Afghan Women, and the Noor Educational Center. A newspaper, *Afghan Women*, was smuggled regularly from Pakistan to Afghanistan during the Taliban regime, when thousands of individual Afghan women ran secret schools for girls or covert businesses in their homes. Arguably, women's organizations and solidarity networks were the most trusted entities in the country during the civil war and Taliban regime. Without such organizations, Afghan women's plight would now be even worse than it is. With no one to promote women's causes, "They would die silently," activist said in an interview. Yet, the U.S. government has made little effort to support or expand such organizations or to learn from their successes about developing culturally appropriate perspectives on social change.

Consultation with Afghan women leaders is especially important as negotiations begin with the Taliban. Whatever men in power might think of the idea, many Afghan women in leadership positions are terrified that this ragtag, un-Islamic, and violently misogynist group might share power. Recent preliminary talks have reinforced their fear that the first "reform" under a Taliban coalitional government could be a revision of the Constitution's declaration that that men and women have "equal rights and duties before the law." Women leaders also warn that the lost decades without education, healthcare, and life opportunities for so many women and girls have left many, if not most of them, traumatized and defenseless against tyranny. There are no "good" Taliban, these leaders say. One said in an interview: "We don't want such a peace that women will be targets of the Taliban. Peace at that price is not worth it."

President Obama can alter the history of U.S. missteps and misinformation by working with the new Afghan administration and its first lady to advance women's rights and well-being. He can also empower and strategize with Afghan women leaders who have a record of success in promoting women's rights and opportunities on local levels as an important part of his future planning for the country. They will tell him that short-term humanitarian aid and programs directed solely toward women can cause resentment and often do little to empower people for the long-term. Afghan women are not begging, according to Rula Ghani, but they need U.S. support to help create basic services and employment opportunities across Afghanistan for themselves and for men, to deal with displaced persons and orphaned children. After more than a decade of telling Afghans what they need, now is a good time for our government to listen, starting with their women leaders.

Partnering with women's groups and leaders is not only good policy but it also makes financial sense. The history of enormously costly but failed U.S. government mega development and infrastructure projects — including those new schools that were destroyed before they could open, and the corruption that tainted such projects — are motivation enough to seek another way.

Taking these steps makes sense for Afghanistan and the United States. Even better, such actions would situate the United States in the forefront of compliance with U.N. Resolution 1325, passed in 2000, which requires member states to make women central in peacemaking and social reconstruction. Mostly honored in the breach, that Resolution could gain new force if the United States chose to recognize it while addressing one of its own daunting geopolitical challenges.

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