

Afghan Women's Hopes for the Future

Written by Ashraf Zahedi

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ASHRAF ZAHEDI, MAR 23 2014

There is a growing concern in Afghanistan about the withdrawal of the United States-led international forces in 2014, the outcome of the April presidential election, and the possibility of political instability and power sharing with the Taliban. Afghan women, primarily from the urban upper and middle classes, are particularly anxious about losing their hard won rights. Over the past thirteen years, Afghan women have made significant gains – in education, health, employment and politics- thanks to the symbolic, technical, and financial support of donors and the international community. Although rural women, urban poor, and women living in the remote regions have yet to benefit from these gains, the achievements of many Afghan women have been remarkable.

However, concerns are being raised as to whether their achievements will be sustained, built upon, or done away with by the next Afghan president. Their achievements, particularly the constitutional ones, are highly significant. [The 2004 Afghan Constitution, chapter two, article twenty two, guarantees gender equality; and chapter five, article eighty three, secures reserved seats for Afghan women in the Parliament.] But what will be their status in the future? Will the international forces stay? Will the donors continue to support Afghan women? What kinds of programs will they fund? Will the peace process and probable power sharing with the Taliban come at the expense of Afghan women? Will political developments in the region increase or decrease the importance of Afghanistan to the West? These are sobering questions and addressing them can only be speculative. The situation in Afghan is unfolding and although only time can tell what will happen, based on the past thirteen years there are certain factors that are likely to impact the future of Afghan women.

Deficit of Political Will

Ongoing insecurity notwithstanding, one of the major problems in advancing Afghan women's causes has been the lack of political will by the Afghan President, Hamid Karzai, and the Afghan Parliament. Karzai's commitment to women has been mostly rhetorical, apparently meant only to please the international community and secure donors' funding. It was only after much pressure from Afghan women activists and their supporters among the international community and donors that Karzai, through a presidential decree, enacted the Law on Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) in August 2009. Even though passage of the EVAW was a step in the right direction, the government has not made a serious commitment to its implementation. It requires raising awareness about gender-based violence as well as the training of judges and the police on the new law. Yet little has been done in this regard.

Karzai has often vacillated between supporting Afghan women and currying favor with conservative members of the Afghan Parliament. Many Afghans and non-Afghans worry about a Taliban infiltration of the Parliament, fearing that they will then reverse women's legal gains. However, there are already numerous members of Parliament who share Taliban ideology and their misogynous views about women's place in Afghan society.

Sixty-nine of the two hundred and forty-nine members of Parliament's *Wolesi Jirga* (the Lower House) and twenty-eight of one hundred and two members of *Meshrano Jirga* (the Upper House) are women. Not all of them, however, vote along gender lines. Progressive female parliamentarians have been instrumental in securing women's rights through legislation and parliamentary procedures. Some out-spoken female parliamentarians, such as Fawzia Koofi and Shukria Barakzai, have name recognition beyond Afghanistan and have presidential aspirations. Yet female parliamentarians have been continuously undermined by the conservatives in the Parliament.

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Last year opposition by conservative members of the Afghan Parliament to the EAW law on May 18, 2013, illustrated the fragile gains of Afghan women. As stated above, the EAW law was finally enacted through Karzai's presidential decree in 2009. It was a landmark law and provided the framework for women's protection against violence.

Faced with the upcoming presidential election in April 2014 and the possibility of the future president overturning the law, some Afghan parliamentarians-male and female- hoping to ratify and thereby secure the law, put the EAW to a vote in May 2013. But conservative parliamentarians branded EAW un-Islamic and in violation of Afghan cultural values. After fifteen minutes of intensely heated debate the Speaker was compelled to send the law to Parliament's Joint Committee for further consideration. The vote was postponed. The future of EAW remains uncertain.

Likewise, on July 18, 2013 the Lower House of the Afghan Parliament passed legislation reducing the guaranteed proportion of the 420 provincial council seats allotted to women from 25 percent to 20 percent. The scheduled departure of international forces from Afghanistan and the prospect of power sharing with the Taliban have been emboldening conservative members of the Parliament, so that time and time again, they have sidelined Afghan women and their quest for equality.

The Donors and Aid Agencies

Much aid has been promised to Afghans in general and Afghan women in particular.

Year after year, through highly publicized conferences in Bonn, Tokyo, London, and Paris, billions of dollars have been pledged for Afghanistan. Yet there is a significant difference between the amount of money pledged and the amount of money disbursed.

Lydia Poole, an independent humanitarian consultant, has pointed to the discrepancy. In her report, *Afghanistan: Tracking Major Resource Flows 2002-2012*, she states that the total aid pledged between 2002-2012 was \$62 billion but the actual total of international aid between 2002-2009 was \$26.7 billion. At its peak, Afghanistan received US\$ 172 per person (per year) compared with Bosnia's peak of US\$369 and Iraq's peak of US \$ 315.

The cost of security aside, aid for socio-economic development in Afghanistan has not been as high as commonly believed. According to Afghanistan's Ministry of Finance: "Since the establishment of the interim Government, a total of USD 90 billion in aid has been pledged for Afghanistan (for the period of 2002-2013) by the international community. Pure commitment for reconstruction and development purposes for the period (2002-2010) stands at USD 37.6 billion out of which USD 28.1 billion has been disbursed so far." The discrepancy between the amount of money pledged and disbursed is significant and should be factored into assessments of donors' commitment to Afghanistan. Likewise it should be taken into consideration in evaluation of the impact of foreign aid in Afghanistan's socio-economic development.

It should be noted that not all these billions of dollars have actually benefited the Afghan people. According to a World Bank report, "Despite the large volume of aid, most international spending 'on' Afghanistan is not spent 'in' Afghanistan, as it leaves the economy through imports, expatriated profits of contractors, and outward remittances."

What has been disbursed to Afghanistan needs further probing. But the question remains: could the international donors have better used the money in order to improve the status of Afghan women? The answer is emphatically yes. They could have done so by addressing the actual needs of Afghan women and by using cost-effective programs and policies.

Donors can play an important role in the lives of women. They can, ironically, both constrain and enable women. They can constrain women by not listening to their voices and not allowing them to articulate their needs, develop their own agendas, or pursue change at their own paces. The top-down approaches of many international donors and aid agencies have effectively silenced Afghan women in whose name they are operating in. To a large extent, donors' agendas for Afghanistan were not developed through consultation with Afghan women, but were mostly

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predetermined, based on blueprints of women's advancement and policy transferred from the West. One such policy transfer, as I have discussed elsewhere, is the adaptation of "gender mainstreaming" as the main strategy for improving Afghan women's socio-economic and political status. For a host of reasons, including the lack of political will and high cost of implementation, success of gender mainstreaming in Afghanistan is unlikely in the near future.

There are reports on duplication of projects, mismanagement of resources and poor donors' coordination. Many donors have even worked on similar projects in the same village. Much has been wasted in the pursuit of agendas that do not respond to Afghan women's real needs and do not reflect their life experiences. Nevertheless, scores of highly paid international consultants found solid employment for themselves by working for the donors and advancing their agendas.

For donors to play truly enabling roles, they need to reshape their policies and allow women greater access to the content of gender agendas and control over resources. They have to work on creating a facilitating environment for gender equality and an effective demand-driven gender agenda. Creating such an environment requires supporting a rights-based agenda as well as policies that secure the legal, social, political, and economic foundations of rights.

Donors are increasingly facing compassion fatigue and are weary of the lack of progress in Afghanistan. Donors' exhaustion has been fashioned, to some extent, by their own narrow understandings of the dynamics of social change and change in gender relations. The position of women in Afghanistan is not a discrete issue that can be somehow fast-tracked toward swift transformation through external pressure and funding. Women's issues cannot be fully addressed without attention to socio-economic and political structures of inequality, the gaps between social classes, the ethnic and tribal divisions, and the endemic poverty that impact both men and women.

Gender equality cannot be achieved in the short time frame of a decade or two. The West took centuries, with many setbacks, to build gender equality into legal, social, political, and economic systems and, in fact, true gender equality has yet to be fully achieved.

The Afghan Women

The lack of security notwithstanding, educated urban women, including the returnees from diaspora are big players in the future of Afghan society. Some of them have capitalized on the socio-political openings in Afghan society and drawn on the support of the international community to develop the organizational and leadership skills required for tackling the socio-political and legal challenges faced by all Afghan women. Numerous Afghan non-governmental organizations are run by Afghan women. Likewise they are engaged in civil society organizations and community-based organizations funded by international donors and aid agencies. They are working in government ministries, business, academia, and the mass media.

They have made inroads to the political system and have benefited from reserved seats in the Afghan Parliament. They have exhibited high political aspirations, for example, in 2004, Dr. Massouda Jalal, a pediatrician, ran for Afghan presidency. However although serving as MPs and obtaining political power is important, it is equally important to take a bottom-up approach by connecting with women of all social classes, religions, and ethnicities-urban and rural- to build a movement with real political potential.

Afghan women are entering a new phase in their struggle to secure their lives and build on the gains made between 2001-2013. They have been making alliances with other civil society organizations, lobbying members of the Parliament, engaging with the international community, and drawing on the experiences of women's organizations worldwide to advance their causes. Afghan women's organizations such as the Jalal Foundation and the Afghan Women's Network have been actively keeping women's rights in the spotlight by publishing statements and open letters to Presidents Karzai and Obama on their websites and posing questions to presidential candidates regarding their views on women's rights. Thanks to the efforts of women's groups, Afghan civil society organizations, national and international NGOs, and the support of mass media, presidential debates have included candidates' views on women's rights and their commitment to the Afghan constitution. Afghan women and their supporters, men and women, are effectively helping to shape public opinion of the candidates and their prospective presidency.

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Afghan women are committed to their cause and for them there is no turning back. Dr. Massouda Jalal, in a personal email to this author on March 13, 2014 states, "We have a strong women's movement in the country, we have strong alliances with international bodies working for the protection, promotion and fulfillment of human rights, we have many women leaders — young and old — who will not allow the gains of the past 13 years to go down the drain even if it may cost them their lives."

Still, Afghan women need support to turn their quest for rights into reality. They need the continued backing of the international community and donors. An unreliable Afghan president and highly conservative Parliament has made the support of the international community and donors even more crucial. In April, there will be a new president and donors must exert pressure on whoever that might be, as well as impelling Parliament by linking future financial aid to sustained gains in Afghan women's status, and to women's involvement in the peace and the implementation of United Nation Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security. Implementation of Resolution 1325 will enhance Afghan women's profile in the peace process and their role as peace builders in their own communities and Afghan society at large.

Moreover international donors should draw on the Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework to keep the Afghan government and parliamentarians in line with the objectives of the Second International Tokyo Conference on Afghanistan (2012). The Tokyo Mutual Accountability Framework outlines the commitment of donors and the Afghan government and states that: "One of the indicators of accountability for the Afghan government is *Article 4, which requires* 'Demonstrated implementation, with civil society engagement, of Elimination of Violence Against Women Law.'"

Despite the questionable future, donors should re-commit themselves to improving the status of Afghan women and pursuing cost-effective measures that could be implemented by both men and women. It is time for a genuine Afghan women's project, envisioned by Afghan women themselves. Donors would be advised to let Afghan women lead the way, while supporting their vision for gender equality in Afghanistan. The social realities in which Afghan women operate may not foster a speedy path to gender equality, but it will be home grown and more sustainable in the long run.

As a highly aid-dependent country, Afghanistan will face a serious financial crisis if the international donors and aid agencies drastically cut their financial commitment to Afghanistan. Economic anxieties may lead to political instability, capital flight and brain drain, impacting upon Afghan men and women who have devoted their lives to re-building Afghanistan and promoting socio-economic and gender equality.

Too much is at stake for the support of Afghan women to be based on financial calculation and return of investment. Neither should it be based solely on political calculation. Support for Afghan women should be guided by moral commitment to the women themselves and to Afghanistan as their country. The financial and political dividends will come to fruition over time. Hopefully the next president of Afghanistan will be more committed to women's causes and will secure the foundations of an enabling environment for women.

About the author:

Ashraf Zahedi, Ph.D. has conducted research at Center for Middle East Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara; the Beatrice Bain Research Group at the University of California, Berkeley; and the Institute for Research on Women and Gender at Stanford University. She has published many articles in academic journals including *Iranian Studies*, *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, and *Women's Studies International Forum*. She is, with Jennifer Heath, the co-editor of *Land of the Unconquerable: The Lives of Contemporary Afghan Women*. Zahedi and Heath's forthcoming book, *Children of Afghanistan: The Path to Peace*, will be published by the University of Texas Press in Fall 2014.

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