

Women and Security Policy: Possibilities, Obstacles, and Perspectives

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A Women's World Security Council is powerful both for its symbolism and as a real goal for the long-term. Part of its power is in making the connections between women, women's rights, and security clear before the world. As long as the international community can ignore these connections, women will achieve neither security nor freedom and peace will not be possible. In the case of Afghanistan, this means we no longer can accept claims by governments that they are committed to restoring Afghan women's rights on the one hand while they do nothing to improve security on the other.

Security is the first priority of women in Afghanistan. For true freedom in Afghanistan, security is essential. Without security, no human being can be free. Only with security can we win the restoration of women's rights, peace and democracy. At the same time, security is not possible without women's rights. They go hand in hand.

I would like to describe the security situation for women in Afghanistan in the past and the present, and to talk about what is necessary for security and how can it be achieved.

The first part of security clearly is physical safety, freedom from violence, and also political stability to prevent a decline into violence. During situations where security is absent, women are often the primary victims of violence from all sides. This was the case over the past two decades of war in Afghanistan. With the Soviet invasion, havoc and destruction prevailed over the nation as countries with political and economic stakes in Afghanistan began to fight a proxy war between each other. All sides side took exception to the trampling of the rights of Afghan women. Men victimized women even further with the claim of upholding Afghan culture and traditions and observing Islamic values. Even the UN and the so-called democratic countries indirectly supported this horrific maltreatment of women.

After the fall of Najib's regime in April 1992, the constitution of the country was suspended and the feeble legal system perished in the rising tide of anarchy. As the warlords perpetrated human rights violations with impunity, violence against women increased to an unprecedented level. Physical violence against women and children became a routine extension of the battlefield tactics.

Although none of the warring sides respected the human rights of women, the actions of Taliban were the most extreme. When the Taliban took over, some people said that they brought peace and security to Afghanistan. But, what kind of peace and security was it for women when they could not leave their homes, they were beaten in the street, and they were not allowed to work? What kind of security was it when giving a girl a pencil and a notebook was considered a crime? Today the world condemns the Taliban, but then the international community looked the other way and ignored the violations of women's rights and human rights with the excuse of peace and security.

In Afghanistan, the situation right now is much better than it has been in the past two decades of war. The country is more peaceful, and women are now able to work and go outside of their homes, and girls can attend school. But the exercise of women's rights and human rights, reconstruction, and establishment of peace and democracy are in great jeopardy because there is not enough security.

In the country within the past nine months, we have seen the assassination of two ministers and other failed attempts to kill government officials. There are many reports of violence in the provinces, of women being raped and of humanitarian aid delivery being interrupted. There are other reports that families have been threatened so that they will not send their daughters to school or allow women to work. Bombs and rockets continue to explode, and gunfire is exchanged.

The absence of enough security is also allowing fundamentalist elements to continue to get away with making threats and taking actions against women who speak out for women's rights and human rights.

For example, 200 women's delegates made history at the Loya Jirga in June by getting elected or appointed as delegates and speaking out for women's rights and the country's future from microphones in the assembly. A woman ran for the presidency. I was elected as deputy chair of the Loya Jirga. But those of us who dared to speak out and dared to think of themselves as human beings with rights were punished quickly and severely.

For trying to exercise our democratic rights to speak, to vote, and to run for office at the Loya Jirga, we were constantly under attack because there are still some people who cannot see and do not believe that a woman is able to do positive work. We were taunted and pressured. We were slandered and called "unIslamic." We were threatened. I received death threats myself. But the true Islam is a religion of peace and respect for human rights and real Muslim is not allowed to insult the personality of another Muslim or human being.

The Taliban with its decrees may be gone, but its legacy and that of others who seek to oppress women continues. Today, unless something is done about the security situation, Afghanistan is in great danger of losing the little progress we have made.

Despite the threats, we have continued to stand up for ourselves, for women's rights, and for a peaceful and democratic Afghanistan. Someone has to take the risk in our country if women and girls are to have freedom in the future. But we need support from the international community to make security possible.

I personally, the Afghan government, and the United Nations have urged the expansion of peace troops beyond Kabul as absolutely necessary to achieving security in Afghanistan. We have been making this request since the beginning of the year, but the world community has not responded.

The Afghan people stand behind the peace and pledge that they will work to bring about stability. We look forward to the day when our national army is prepared and mobilized well enough to respond to acts of violence and instability in any part of our country. But one cannot expect a government in place for only nine months to be able to respond to the level of challenges that we face after more than twenty years of destruction and war culture.

We are told that an expansion of peacekeeping forces is too expensive. But another cycle of war will pose an even greater expense to the world: it will be costly in terms of the loss of human lives. It will waste perhaps our last real chance to reverse the decades of violence and to create peace and stability in Afghanistan and the region.

We learned that the violence does not simply stay within the borders of Afghanistan, but that it grows roots and extend to areas well beyond the country and the

region. While the Taliban and the Al-Qaeda network may be gone – although even that is uncertain, the conditions of insecurity and fear can once again be the breeding ground for negative forces.

Security in Afghanistan will never be achieved if the answer is seen as depending on the forces of warlords or one political faction or another.

Security for women also means access to basic human rights such as education and health care, to work that allows them to help support themselves and their families, and to food and shelter. In Afghanistan, we need to build a central government capable of governing and establishing democracy throughout the country. It must be able to provide services such as education and health. It must be able to ensure women's rights and human rights.

Afghanistan needs resources in order to rebuild the nation's education and health system and its physical infrastructure. The amount of aid that the interim government has received has been very small, compared with the pledges and especially compared with the tremendous need. We need financial resources to demonstrate that peace creates changes in the conditions of people's lives. We also need job opportunities for women, and also importantly for former war combatants so they can put down their guns and see there is a future without war.

Almost ten months have gone by since the interim government took office. But despite the promises in Tokyo and despite the constant visits of foreign officials to Afghanistan, virtually no reconstruction or construction, outside of some small NGO projects, has begun in any sector – not roads, not education, not health care.

The world cannot expect Afghanistan to be rebuilt or stability to be sustained in this region of the world without substantial resources. The people of Afghanistan are beginning to lose the hope that they gained when the Taliban collapsed and the world community promised to help restore peace, democracy, and women's rights. The lack of progress in Afghanistan's reconstruction is more than an embarrassment. It is a danger to all of us.

Women's political participation is crucial to security. Women must be full participants in the political, social, and economic arenas, in our country's reconstruction, and in the world's security bodies for the Kaliznokov and war culture to come to an end.

At the same time that we pursue the Women's Security Council, the women of the world also must take concrete steps to improve security and increase demilitarization in countries in the short-term. In the case of Afghanistan, I ask for your immediate support in urging your governments to support the expansion of international peace keeping forces and to increase the commitment to reconstruction funding.

We need the global solidarity of women to make sure that history does not repeat itself in Afghanistan and that real and lasting security for women and for the Afghan people in general is achieved. Thank you for your support.