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Sent: Wednesday, May 12, 2010 9:24 AM
To: H
Subject: FW: Foreign Policy Magazine-Betrayed: They said we were there to save Afghan women. How Come we havent?

This is what we are up against.

Betrayed

They said we were there to save Afghanistan's women. So how come we haven't?

BY VALERIE M. HUDSON, PATRICIA LEIDL | MAY 10, 2010



One day in November 2009, in Helmand province's capital of Lashkar Gah, a group of Afghan widows and divorcees met with Patricia, who had been commissioned to write a series of success stories for the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). All the women were in their 20s, 30s, and 40s but looked to be in their 60s. Until very recently, none of them could work because they possessed no marketable skills, could neither read nor write, and were at risk of being killed if they left their homes. A number of women said that, before the program -- which focused on tailoring and basic literacy -- their children used to weep at night from hunger.

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As Patricia prepared to leave, the women fluttered around her like moths, touching her sleeves and speaking all at once. "What are they saying?" Pat asked the young Pashto-speaking interpreter. "They are telling you to go back to your country and to ask your people not to abandon them. The women of Afghanistan don't want you to leave. They will quite literally die if the Taliban return," she said.

In a recent question-and-answer period at one of our universities, Brigham Young, a student asked Gen. David Petraeus whether anyone thought to ask the women of Afghanistan how they felt about U.S. hopes to incorporate "reformed" Taliban into governance structures as the Americans leave.

Carefully avoiding the word "women," the general assured the questioning student that only "moderate" Taliban would be eligible for such rehabilitation. Left unaddressed was the definition of "moderate," which clearly depends on where you sit: If you sit in a burqa, there is no such thing as a "moderate" Taliban.

Petraeus might find it easy now to sidestep the question of what will happen to Afghanistan's women once the "moderate" Taliban come back, but it's likely to haunt him for a long time. Without the security of women there is no security -- and until we've done more to protect it, we have a moral and practical obligation to stay in Afghanistan.

In 2001, George W. Bush's administration interpreted the first post-invasion photos of Afghan girls heading to school and of Afghan women unveiling their faces as tangible evidence that conditions were improving in that benighted land. A few months after the invasion, in his 2002 State of the Union address, Bush announced, "The last time we met in this chamber, the mothers and daughters of Afghanistan were captives in their own homes, forbidden from working or going to school. Today women are free and are part of Afghanistan's new government."

The Americans strong-armed a handful of women into the *loya jirga* that then drafted the Afghan Constitution. They strong-armed a quota for women in the Afghan national legislature -- something that even American women are not treated to. U.S. troops built schools for girls and pushed for women to be included in the local *shuras*, and USAID ripped a page from Greg Mortenson's *Three Cups of Tea* and facilitated new training and educational opportunities for women.

But the current administration, despite its female secretary of State and its new Office of Global Women's Issues, appears to be ditching the women of Afghanistan like a blind date gone bad. You have to go back 10 months to find any sustained rhetoric from President Barack Obama about the importance of assuring the security of women in Afghanistan. Since then, and especially since last year's Afghan election, those fine words from a sitting president have all but disappeared. Many of the fine actions are gone, too. Push local *shuras* into including women in 2002? Yes. Push local *shuras* into including women in 2010? Forget it.

It's not difficult to understand why. Afghanistan is in crisis. The cynical policies that characterized the early to mid-stages of the occupation have come home to roost. President Hamid Karzai and his rogue's gallery of kleptocrats, human rights abusers, and drug lords are hanging onto power even as Karzai declares open season on the United Nations by accusing senior bureaucrats of organizing the widespread voter fraud that consolidated his *own* hold on power.

In the meantime, women have taken a back seat to realpolitik and the exigencies of a coalition exit strategy. But their suffering is real, as Afghanistan's poverty and chaos affect women possibly most of all. Maternal mortality in Afghanistan still makes the world's top three list, nine years after the U.S. invasion, resulting in a life expectancy for women of 46. In the countryside, Taliban zealots spray acid into girls' faces for going to school -- and only 27 percent of them do so in the first place. According to a recent survey by the U.N. Development Fund for Women, 87 percent of Afghan women report being beaten on a regular basis.

In July of last year, the U.N. Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) issued a report that represents the most stinging official condemnation of the Karzai administration's abysmal track record on women to date. The report concluded, "The current reality is that ... women are denied their most fundamental human rights and risk further violence in the course of seeking justice for crimes perpetrated against them." Last year Karzai pardoned well-connected political thugs who -- before witnesses -- gang-raped a woman with a bayonet. Her husband, who had battled for redress, was assassinated soon thereafter. Women who dare to speak out against the widespread trampling of their rights face almost certain death while their murderers face 100 percent impunity.

For the warlords and mujahideen that make up the upper echelons of the Karzai government, the issue of gender equality was always an unwanted appendage to U.S. involvement -- but one that could easily be dispensed with through the deployment of flowery speeches and the token appointment of a lone female minister to the Ministry of Women's Affairs. Indeed, just before his recent "election," Karzai felt secure enough to sign into law a series of repressive measures designed to repeal what minimal gains women have made since the Taliban ouster.

Although eventually forced to back down over legislation that allows Shiite husbands to rape their wives, Karzai successfully signed into law other legislation that denies or severely limits women's rights to inherit, divorce, or have guardianship of their own children. The Shiite Personal Status Law also legalizes forced marriage and the rape of minors. It allows men to exert almost total control over female relatives and offers them the power to prohibit women's access to work, education, and health care by denying them the right to leave their homes except for "legitimate" purposes. Even Karzai's own wife -- a doctor whose skills are desperately needed -- is strictly sequestered. And if this sounds bad, just wait until the Americans leave.

This is not just about women. Gender inequality not only affects girls and women, but boys and men. In Afghanistan, because women are rarely able to leave the house, very young boys are often forced to carry an unwarranted amount of financial responsibility, something that limits their prospects as well.

Nor is it even just about Afghanistan. As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in March, "The subjugation of women is a threat to the national security of the United States." On a geopolitical level, Valerie's research has found that states with higher levels of violence against women are also less peaceful internationally. Indeed, violence against women is a better predictor of bellicosity than level of democracy, level of wealth, or presence of Islamic civilization. In a 2010 study, Valerie, along with Brad Thayer, also found high levels of gender inequality to be a strong aggravating factor in the development of Islamic suicide terrorism.

So, given the desperate need of Afghanistan's women and the serious consequences worldwide, why aren't we doing more to help? One reason is the fallacious notion, common among coalition members, that Afghan "culture" does not allow for gender equality and that forcing the issue will undermine Western interests. Pat heard this openly from one coalition representative, who prefers to remain anonymous: "There is no point in pushing gender equality. It will only alienate them [Afghans]." Of course, "them" here refers only to men.

But decision-makers forget that culture is not fixed, but is highly mutable and dynamic. More than 30 years ago, Afghan women were attending universities, teaching, working as doctors, nurses, and professors. Far from being a black hole of gender apartheid, Afghanistan, though impoverished, was more progressive than many of its Muslim neighbors. Furthermore, many young Afghans are open to new ways of doing things. In 2009, hundreds of Afghan men and women bravely stood together in Kabul to protest Karzai's support for a new and oppressive Shiite family law. If Americans assume that all Afghan men are Neanderthals incapable of sympathizing with the plight of their sisters, they are wrong.

Another, more unmentionable reason may be the chauvinism that permeates Western military culture. U.S. military life, despite increasing female recruitment and even "female engagement teams," remains a bastion of masculinity, with little sensitivity toward questions of female rights. For military leadership and recruits alike, immured as they are in an almost exclusively male world, the complete absence of women from Afghanistan's streets and villages elicited no comment from the Marines who surrounded Pat, though she as a woman noticed it immediately.

And the ready availability of pornography on U.S. bases, coupled with seamier depictions of life in the West, not only damages prospects for gender equality but by extension, Western interests. As one young, well-educated 24-year-old Afghan male pointed out, "Your culture has no respect for women at all. Look at your pornography and the way you exploit women in ways that we can't even imagine. Do you call that progress?" Added another Afghan USAID programmer working in Gardez, a man in his 50s who is the father of three girls, "It would be better for the coalition if they could figure out a way to limit this kind of material."

We can do better -- much better.

The Obama administration must instill in all military personnel and senior diplomats the necessity of fully protecting women's rights. Key to that is educating them about how gender equality furthers Western interests *and* security.

The military should spend less time courting "moderate" Taliban and more time showing Afghan community leaders how gender equality -- including female access to family planning methods -- will result in healthier families, lower maternal and child death rates, poverty alleviation, and greater self-determination. Gender should be included as a component in all

governance training and should be placed front and center in the upcoming "peace jirga" that will include the Taliban. Indeed, let half of the negotiating team representing the government and the coalition be female: yes, a full 50 percent.

Women must also be represented in the government. As Melanne Verveer, U.S. ambassador at large for global women's issues, noted last summer, speaking of female politicians in Afghanistan, "There is only one minister in the cabinet, and she is powerless. There is a low percentage of women in the civil service. There is only one female governor, in Bamiyan." Obama must insist on important changes for women before we leave and make subsequent aid contingent upon maintenance of a strong presence for women in the Afghan government.

Better yet, the coalition needs to support "regime change" through the building of democratic institutions that will groom a moderate, educated middle class of young women and men to eventually take over. Over two-thirds of the Afghan population is under the age of 25, which is either a real opportunity for social change -- if they are educated and given a chance to shape their society in a progressive way -- or a major obstacle, if they find themselves without jobs, unable to marry, and burdened with retrograde attitudes of what it means to be male and female.

We must hold Afghanistan responsible for its treaty obligations under the U.N. Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325 on women, peace, and security. Afghanistan signed CEDAW without reservations (the United States interestingly, has not), and that means that it has committed to passing whatever legislation is necessary to implement the wide-ranging principles of gender equality enshrined in that treaty. This includes taking measures to ensure that women enjoy the same basic human rights and fundamental freedoms as men, having in place legal and judicial procedures to protect the rights of women, taking measures to eliminate sexist discrimination, and lastly, submitting national reports every four years to a U.N. advisory group of international experts, the CEDAW Committee, to ensure transparency on what measures the country has taken to implement the treaty's provisions.

Unanimously adopted in 2000, UNSC 1325 marked the first time the Security Council recognized the disproportionate and unique impact of armed conflict on women and stressed the importance of their equal and full participation as active agents in peace and security.

Needless to say, women do *not* currently enjoy the same fundamental freedoms as men, and indeed, with the passing of the Shiite family law, many are worse off than they were before.

To change this, the coalition needs to stay in Afghanistan. Withdrawing at this critical juncture would doom Afghanistan and the entire region to instability and effectively consign one half of the population to premature death and an existence not fit for animals.

We are creating a shameful American tradition of leaving women no better off (Afghanistan) -- or even much worse off (Iraq) -- than before U.S. troops intervened. On the basis of America's track record, women around the world should have no faith that U.S. soldiers will improve their security. Despite Clinton's remarks on the link between gender equality and security, on the ground Americans act as if women's well-being, in the end, is not more than peripherally related to the issue of peace. As we have seen, this view could not be more wrong. Verveer's benchmarks concerning Afghanistan are the right ones: "Progress in Afghanistan must be measured not just in military terms, but also in terms of social, political, and economic participation of women in rebuilding Afghanistan and in the safeguarding of their human rights."

American women are right to ask why we are sending their sons and daughters to fight and die so that Afghan women can continue to be treated like an inferior subspecies of humanity. When you break faith with Afghan women, you break faith with American women. You also break faith with your reasons for being there in the first place.

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