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Transition Within Tradition: Women's Participation in Restoring Afghanistan

Rina Amiri,[1,3] Swanee Hunt,[2] and Jennifer Sova[2]

The eyes of the world focused on Afghanistan: our global consciousness was awakened to the plight of a population in turmoil. The subjugation of women served as part of a call to arms, another reason used to justify armed conflict half a world away. Images of women in *burkas*, kept from education, health care, and meaningful work, their myriad talents and skills wasted, helped mobilize the coalition that joined in defeating the Taliban.

KEY WORDS: Tradition; Afghanistan; women; Transition.

A year after the Taliban collapsed and the December 2001 Bonn Agreement established the temporary Afghan government, there has been marked progress in the advancement of women's issues. The first Ministry of Women's Affairs has been established; there are a number of women in government, including the Minister of Health. In the *Loya Jirga*, council that elects the head of the Afghan state, 11% of the delegates were women, and one woman gathered enough votes to challenge President Karzai for the presidential seat. Over 3 million students, including women and girls, have returned to school; and women have been able to resume professional positions as teachers, doctors, lawyers, and judges.

However, this period has also been checkered by fierce resistance to women's progress and a backlash from radical conservatives. In a series of publicized political battles, traditionalists took on the government, demanding a ban on women's images and voices in the media. The government prevailed, but has been careful not to sideline traditionalists, supporting other conservative measures affecting women. Perhaps most controversial, the infamously repressive Ministry of Vice and Virtue, established by the Taliban, has reappeared as the Department of Islamic Teaching. While the situation has markedly improved since the Taliban regime, the stage is set for a struggle between traditionalists and modernists; and once again women's roles and religion are central to the conflict.

Afghanistan has been devastated by decades of war and social unrest. The nation is at a critical juncture that could lead to long-term peace and security or continued civil strife. To create sustainable progress, support for women's rights and roles must be couched within Afghan culture, history, and religion. This is no simple task. Islamic religious texts, like scriptures of other faiths, are subject to different interpretations. Widely divergent social norms are described by their proponents as rooted in Islam, including behaviors considered repressive by many other Muslims.

While women in Afghanistan and other parts of the Muslim world face many obstacles, there are also, within Islam and Afghan history, important precedents of women playing active roles in politics, business, healthcare, education, the media, and the military, among others. Many modern Afghan leaders say the foundation of Islamic religion accords women protection, including the right to education, property, and civic participation. The reconstruction of Afghanistan can build on these beliefs and past experiences. The belief that reform should come from within Islam is not, however, universally held. Some argue that the discourse on women should

[1]United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan.
[2]Hunt Alternatives Fund.
[3]To whom correspondence should be addressed at United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan; e-mail: rina_amiri@harvard.edu.

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be removed from the religious context, where traditionalists and the *Ulema* (Muslim scholars trained in Islamic law) have the clear advantage.

Gender policies have always been part of a larger ideological debate between traditionalist and modernist forces in Afghanistan. Efforts to support and emancipate women have often been led by male political leaders as part of the effort to modernize. Such gender measures have been challenged repeatedly and at times reversed by the conservative orthodoxy, consisting primarily of religious leaders and the rural population. This pattern has been repeated in recent Afghan history even before the Taliban, as the past century witnessed a series of governments led by monarchs, Marxists, and Mujahideen. Each of these political movements resulted in a reevaluation of women's roles and legislative acts that either supported women's emancipation or barred them from public space. Although none of these regimes proved permanent, each has left its influence on Afghan culture.

Thus traditionalists and modernists, opponents and proponents of women's rights, can look to precedents in Afghan history to support their positions. While Islam was a unifying force among different regional identities and groups, religious practice was one of choice and often marked by tolerance and respect.

In 30 years of political upheaval and war, this attitude of tolerance has diminished; there has been a radicalization of Afghan culture, affecting both religious practice and attitudes toward gender. This narrow thinking developed during the Soviet invasion, continued throughout the time the Mujahideen were in control, and became even more extreme during the Taliban period. During the postconflict transition period, it is unlikely that the situation will change quickly. Thus, advocacy on behalf of women must be introduced with a proper understanding of the country's sociopolitical and religious history.

AFGHAN WOMEN AND GENDER POLICIES

The identity of Afghan women is multidimensional and imbedded in their extended family network, ethnicity (e.g., Hazara, Uzbek, Pashtun, etc), religion (e.g., Sunni, Shiite, Sufi), language (e.g., Pashto, Farsi, Tajiki, Dari), social class (based on sharp socioeconomic divides), urban or rural background, education, and political affiliation. Afghan women's situations and needs vary accordingly. For example, there are dramatic differences between rural and urban women who comprise 85% and 15% of the female adult population, respectively. Rural women often live within the extended family, insulated by the family compound. Thus, during conflict, rural women have had fewer disturbances of their normal lives than urban women. On the other hand, urban women have had more professional and educational opportunities, as well as access to some political decision-making positions. In the past, the degree to which women could take advantage of these possibilities was determined largely by her family's social standing, including financial situation and access to elite circles.

Gender roles in Afghanistan have often been interdependent. As in many traditional societies, adults of both sexes recognize that each plays relevant and important roles, albeit in different spheres. This is particularly true in rural Afghanistan, where men's and women's roles in agricultural work are closely tied. For example, in carpet weaving, men herd and shear the sheep; women spin the wool into yarn and weave the carpet. In the home, women often exert significant influence over the family, alongside their husbands; but each has his or her particular and defined role. Women are often responsible for financial matters, household management, and the welfare of the family. Men often make final decisions regarding matters that involve the outside world, including arranged-marriage agreements and the family's interactions and dealings within their community.

In addition to the cultural and historical norms in Afghan society, years of internal conflict have had an impact on gender relations. In December 2001, professor Maliha Zulfacar commented during the Transition within Tradition Conference.

> With the enforcement of exclusionary policies regarding women's participation in the Afghan political, socio-economic and educational institutions, the ill-effects of war have been most harsh on Afghan women. They have not only suffered from hunger, deprivation, and despair, but they also have endured the politicized gender policies that have constrained their access to productive roles and resources such as land and credit. Although Afghanistan is a moderate Islamic society, some have wrongfully used concepts of gender under Islam as a tool to support their political agendas. (Zulfacar, noted during Transition within Tradition Conference, December, 2001)

While quantitative analysis is not available, it is clear that, as in most war-torn countries, the demographic and social profile inside Afghanistan has

been affected. Similarly, in many refugee camps the rural versus urban divide among women has also been weakening; women with a variety of backgrounds have been able to acquire new skills and to exchange perspectives on gender issues. The return of the Diaspora from the West will also undoubtedly shape ideas about women's roles and rights.

While central to the heritage of Afghanistan and other countries with a history of repressive gender policies, Islam is not necessarily the force that has led to women's subordination. Not only does the Qur'an emphasize that righteousness is identical in the case of man or woman, but it affirms, clearly and consistently, women's equality with men and their fundamental rights to actualize their human potential. In fact, when seen through a nonpatriarchal lens, the Qur'an goes beyond egalitarianism. It exhibits particular solicitude toward women as also toward other classes of disadvantaged persons (R. Hassan noted during Transition within Tradition Conference, December, 2001).

Within the context of colonialism and the ascendancy of Western norms, a politicized version of Islam has emerged, entailing a rejection of Western culture in favor of an "authentic," more "spiritual" and "pure" way of life. This political movement has often focused on "emancipated women" as a symbol of modernization and as a threat to the integrity of Islamic and indigenous traditions. With this rationale, laws unfavorable to women have been passed in the name of Islam. Azizah Y. Al-Hibri, an expert in Islamic jurisprudence notes that for many years, Islam was used in Afghanistan as the justification for policies that inflicted serious harm (*dharar*) on women. The Afghan woman was denied the right to education despite the fact that, according to the Prophet, seeking an education is the duty of every Muslim, male or female. She was denied the right to earn a respectable living despite the fact that the Qur'an states that every person is allotted what they earn. She was also denied participation in the political process, despite the fact that the Qur'an itself recognized her right to such participation. This state of affairs shocks the conscience, given the explicit Qur'anic stand in support of women. The overarching Qur'anic view of gender relations is rooted in the basic assertion that God created us all from a singe soul" (Al-Hibri, noted during Transition within Tradition Conference, December, 2001).

Neighboring countries offer valuable lessons for women in Afghanistan as Muslim women strive to develop an understanding of their rights within the Islamic tradition. A prerevolution minister in neighboring Iran Mahnaz Afkhami believes that "as Muslim women activists, it is necessary for us to reinterpret and redefine our cultures and to seek indigenous roots for our rights—to change when we must, to search out what is authentically supportive of our rights, and to replace what has been shaped to uphold patriarchal social structures. Change will mean transformation. Change will require improving our condition by taking an active role in administration, practice, expression, and definition of culture, tradition, and religion" (Afkhami, noted during Transition within Tradition Conference, December, 2001).

We will now examine female access to education, women in the economic sphere, and women's political participation in Afghanistan. Suggestions will also be made to improve the condition of women in these three domains.

EDUCATION

The draconian gender policies of the Taliban colored perceptions regarding female access to education in Afghanistan. While literacy levels were typically less than 20%, the historical pre-Taliban record indicates steady progress in access to schooling, including higher education for daughters of elite families and urban dwellers, as well as slow growth in literacy and schooling for rural women and girls, who comprise the vast majority of the female population (Moghadam, 1994). Since the modern school system was established in the 1920s, there have been schools for Afghan girls. In the late 1920s, the first Afghan women were sent abroad for education (Samady, 2001). In 1957, the first faculty of teachers' training for women was established at Kabul University; and 2 years later the university became coeducational (Samady, 2001).

Traditional elements within society challenged each of these measures. Often, the challengers gained some concessions, including separate facilities for girls' and boys' schools and conservative uniforms for both. While complying, proponents of education for girls, as well as boys, made some progress. In the 1980s, government statistics indicated there were 440,000 female students enrolled in schools in Afghanistan and 11,000 female teachers (Malikyar, 1997). Still, despite the fact that the 1964 Constitution stipulated compulsory schooling, the realities of poverty, underdevelopment, and patriarchal attitudes limited girls' access to school.

After 1979, the Soviet-dominated Democratic Republic of Afghanistan made education, and especially schooling for girls, a major social policy. The regime launched a literacy campaign targeting children, teen-aged girls, and women. From the beginning, the project met with strong objections, in part because the campaign was enmeshed in the communist political agenda. The curriculum was replete with Marxist language advocating urban and modern mores and behavior, often characterizing traditional models as backward. The result was a significant backlash against education, particularly in rural areas, with distrust and widespread rejection of education initiatives undertaken by the government.

The 10-year war against the Soviets prevented both the expansion of the educational system and an increase in school enrollment. According to World Bank figures from 1980, primary school enrollment was only 54% for the male population and 12% for females (GenderStats, 2002). Illiteracy remained extremely high, especially for females. However, in 1989, Kabul boasted seven higher education institutes with a total of 15,319 students, both male and female. Kabul University alone had about 7000 students, of whom 65% were female. Additionally, the Medical Institute under the Ministry of Public Health had 3000 students, making a total of over 18,000 students nationwide; more than double the enrollment of the previous decade (Moghadam, 1994).

Subsequently, the Mujahideen civil conflict of 1992–94 and the Taliban's prohibition of schooling for girls and of employment for women as teachers resulted in a dramatic decline in education for girls, as well as boys. In 2000, the World Bank estimated that boys' enrollment in primary schools slowed to about 2%, while girls' enrollment dropped nearly to zero (GenderStats, 2002). The Gender Advisor to the UN System in Afghanistan reported that recent literacy rates are 4% for women and 30% for men (Gender advisor, 2000, as cited in the U.S. Department of State Web site, 2001).

Even before the decades of war and unrest, due to a lack of resources, Afghanistan has failed to educate most of its population. Girls and women have been most affected because of gender bias and traditional customs, but there is a countervailing history of compulsory education for boys and girls in urban areas and enrollment of women in higher education and professional schools. Moreover, reaction against the systematic oppression of women under the Taliban regime has created an atmosphere of support for women's and girls' education and employment. During the reigns of the Mujahideen and the Taliban, women successfully ran secret schools for boys and girls and organized networks of women in Afghanistan and abroad. As Elaheh Rostami Povey learned during her recent research in Kabul, these established organizations have already earned high-levels of trust within Afghanistan and the larger community and can serve as a base for the continued expansion of women's participation in Afghan society (Povey, 2003, p. 272).

There is broad consensus among Islamic scholars that education as a right and responsibility of every citizen is supported by the essential teachings of Islam. Consistent with that scriptural imperative, the principle of educating women and girls is pervasive throughout Islamic cultures; and Islamic history includes examples of women scholars, poets, and authors. In practice, the concept of education in Islam is much broader than basic literacy. Formal and nonformal education extends not only into knowledge about a wide range of fields, but also into women's rights within Islam. Historical examples of this broad spectrum of women's education abound: many wives of the Prophet were educated women; Aisha bint Sa'd and Nafissa were leading jurists as early as the second century; women authored major traditions within the faith; men went to schools to study the words of women; and women historically led prayer.Islamic literary figures include Sukaynab bint al-Hussayn, the granddaughter of the Prophet; Zainab, the physician of the tribe of bani Awd; and Um al-Hassan the daughter of the Islamic Prophet, Muhammad.

There are many positive lessons to be learned from governments of other Muslim countries, which vary greatly in their culture, traditions, social systems, and attitudes toward educating women. Although many women in other Muslim countries have progressed to the university level, those in more traditional rural areas often do not exercise that right for social, economic, or family reasons. In post-World War II Iran many women attended university; under the Shah, a critical mass of educated women specialized in a broad range of fields. After the Iranian revolution, led by the Ayatollah Khomeni, women argued on religious grounds that they were guaranteed education. They won that argument; the university, in fact, was considered "morally safe." Today, Iran has achieved nearly 70% female literacy according to the UN (World Bank, 2002).

In Egypt, modern girls' schools date back to the nineteenth century, but these were preceded by

Islamic schools, not as politicized as some of the *madrassas* of today. Women began attending university around 1930, and compulsory education for girls has been in effect in Egypt since the 1950s. According to the United Nations Development Program's Human Development Report (2003), girls made up almost half of the total secondary school enrollment (United Nations Development Program, 2003). In Lebanon, women comprised nearly 70% of teachers in 1996 (Hariri, 1997). In the United Arab Emirates, women made up 70% of the university student population in 1997 (The World's Women, 2000).

Thus, though women in the Muslim world continue to face challenges when seeking educational opportunities, progress has been made in a variety of countries. The rights and opportunities for women to be educated are established in religious texts, Afghan history, and the laws and practice of neighboring nations. All these are evidence that the building of a strong and equitable Afghan educational system, consistent with the country's culture, is not only critical but also feasible.

GENDER AND EDUCATION RECOMMENDATIONS: TO BRIDGE AFGHANISTAN'S EDUCATIONAL GENDER GAP

1. Teacher training and curricula, vulnerable to political whims, must be standardized. Afghan teachers, in Afghanistan and in the Diaspora, should be called upon to develop those standards.
2. Night schools and other educational programs should be established to compensate for education denied during recent years. The reestablishment and expansion of women's education (including married women) should include creative literacy-building tools such as instructional radio programs, practical job training appropriate to the needs of villages, and income-generating programs. Education must be oriented to women's real lives, taking into account the need for childcare, as well as other social and cultural limitations.
3. As many educators as possible should be women, to create a sense of safety for female students and their families.
4. Finally, school curricula and vocational training should prepare women and girls for productive economic activity and employment, with particular attention to the enormous needs in the field of health care.

ECONOMIC SPHERE

In urban Afghanistan, women have been involved since the 1940s in a variety of professions: as teachers, doctors, government workers, and entertainers. According to the World Development Index, by 1990, 34% of the formal labor force was female (GenderStats, 2002). Just 6 years later, women made up half the civil service in Afghanistan (Malikyar, 1998). Women also worked in the armed forces, hospitals, mills, and universities. Still, over the last several decades of political violence and instability, Afghan women throughout the country have been, to a greater or lesser degree, economically dispossessed, excluded from decision making, and marginalized from productive employment. Even more than Afghan culture or Islamic religion, the main problem for girls and women has been the continuous conflict in the region, which has reduced millions of Afghan women to poverty, a high rate of illiteracy, lack of childcare, extremely poor health, and the instability of refugee life. These disadvantages have colluded with other factors to deprive women of a significant economic role in their society.

On a positive note, women have shown great strength and creativity as survivors of extraordinarily challenging situations: as war widows, over 500,000 Afghan women are heads of household. Thousands of others have had to assume leadership of their families while their husbands have been away at war. In refugee camps in Pakistan and Iran, Afghan women have gained a wide variety of skills as leaders of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), as local entrepreneurs, and as workers in cottage industries. For the first time, they have been trained, for example, to use a sewing machine to make quilts and garments. Many educated refugee women and girls in Pakistan have also gained employment in NGOs and UN offices. Afghanistan and the international community can capitalize on these skills in rebuilding the postwar economy.

In the seventh century, Islam recognized the disenfranchised position of women in Arab society and prescribed measures to address women's economic rights. An area of clear disparity between the financial rights of men and women is the issue of inheritance. The Qur'an accords women half the inheritance of men, except in a few exceptional cases where

their rights are equal. Muslim feminists argue that granting women the right to inherit was revolutionary. They point out that women's unequal share of inheritance was in keeping with the economic realities of the seventh century, when men were responsible for the entire economic welfare of the family. Thus, if the Qur'anic prescriptions are understood in their proper historical and cultural context, it becomes evident that the Islamic religion worked toward women's economic empowerment rather than promoting discrimination. Those who believe the Qur'an should be interpreted according to the conditions of the time argue that the inheritance policy should be changed in modern settings where both men and women contribute financially to the family.

Furthermore, policies that exclude Muslim women from the economic sphere ignore prominent examples of working women in the early days of Islam: Omar, for example, the second Caliph (a successor to the Prophet and the leader of the Muslim community), appointed a woman as the marketplace supervisor. Recently, some Muslim countries with economic challenges less severe than Afghanistan's have revised their laws to fit their own circumstances, recognizing women's right to work in the wide range of professions and occupations available to them in the Islamic world.

When Bangladesh gained independence in 1971, the government began initiatives to provide gainful employment for poor women by organizing skills training and encouraging the development of small industries based on traditional crafts of the region. Women's economic participation has been steadily rising since the mid-1980s. In 1999, according to the World Development Index, the labor force in Bangladesh was 42% female (World Bank, 2002). Similarly, Egypt has been diligent in its efforts to increase the economic participation of women. One of the primary foci of its program on Economic and Social Development for the last 4 years has been to increase women's roles in the economy (National Guidelines in Egypt, 2002, E.quality@work section). In 1999, Jordanian Deputy Prime Minister Rima Khalaf called for the intensification of national efforts to increase women's participation in the economic sector. Jordan's Ministry of Planning has included increasing women's economic participation as one of their goals in their current national plan. In Oman, the government—as part of its 5-year plan—is promoting women's participation in the economic sphere. Government training and poverty-reduction activities focus on increasing women's self-reliance through income-generating programs, loans, and skills training. In Morocco and Tunisia, women are particularly important in industrial development and manufacturing exports.

Economic development experts have long asserted that no nation is capable of reaching its full economic and productive potential without the participation of all its members, for men and women bring different but equally important skills to the marketplace. Muslim countries have lagged behind Western nations, in part due to women's marginalization from employment, vocational training, and the upgrading of their skills. Some Muslim nations have recognized these problems and have worked in a variety of ways to balance traditional culture and contemporary necessity in structuring their economies. These countries can serve as models for rectifying gender-related economic inequities.

GENDER AND ECONOMICS RECOMMENDATIONS: TO BRING WOMEN INTO THE ECONOMIC MAINSTREAM

1. The recognition of Afghan women's right to work (included in the 1964 Afghan Constitution) should be reinstated. In addition, given the adverse circumstances of many war widows and orphaned children, especially girls, women's right to own and control their own property and income should be guaranteed by law.
2. Local women's rights to economic participation lay the basis for a productive economy; therefore, they should be involved in decision making at the provincial and district levels and in the refugee camps to encourage grassroots women's economic empowerment at the community level.
3. Afghan women's NGOs offering vocational training, generating employment, and providing needed services should be supported financially and through an array of social policies. Women are not only entitled to participate in the reconstruction of Afghanistan; they are vital to that reconstruction and to the development of agriculture, industry, and public and private services.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

The political movement supporting Afghan women's rights is over 100 years old, and Afghan

history and folklore are replete with stories of women who played heroic roles in military and political struggles. Zaynab, for example—a scholar in both Pashto and Dari—acted as a political adviser. Malalay, another famous heroine, rallied Afghan troops in the war against the British in 1880. Ghazi Ade is famed for going into battle and rescuing the Afghan flag for fighters opposing the British during the second Anglo-Afghan war (1878–1880).

Afghan political leadership and elite have often been proponents of women's rights. Women were enfranchised without a suffrage movement by the regime of Zahir Shah in the 1964 Constitution. In the 1970s, women represented 15% of the *Loya Jirga* and served as members of the national parliament, cabinet, and administrators in the government.

When the communists came to power in 1978, the regime held up women as role models and encouraged their participation in all ranks of the Communist Party and the government. Prominent Afghan women included Anahita Ratebzad, Minister of Social Affairs and Minister of Education; Jamila Palwasha, Vice-President of the Publicity and Extension Department of the PDPA Central Committee; and Masuma Asmati Wardak, President of the All Afghan Women's Council.

Following the Soviet invasion, women were pushed center stage in the public arena and often made to assume key roles in public demonstrations and on television propaganda programs. This was considered an assault on female honor by the traditionalists, who reacted by becoming more entrenched in their position that women should be prevented from receiving an education and participating in public life. The strong revulsion for the policies of the Soviets contributed to increasingly conservative attitudes toward women's public and political participation. What started as a rejection of Soviet policy by the Mujahideen became the most repressive policy toward women in the world under the Taliban. After a century of liberalizing policies, women lost fundamental rights.

Women's political leadership is one of the most contested issues in Islamic interpretation. The central argument of the opponents of women's leadership is based on the Hadith quoting the Prophet after he heard that the Persians had crowned the daughter of Kisra as their ruler: "Those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know their prosperity" (Mernissi, 1991, p. 17). However, some scholars question the authenticity of the Hadith and those who accept the Hadith as containing some injunction differ on its meaning. Some view the injunction as prohibiting women from all public duties; others claim that it permits a woman to hold every public office except head of state.

The fact that none of the caliphs after the Prophet's death were women is used as another argument against women's political leadership. But Islamic history and the Qur'an provide ample evidence of women undertaking various forms of political involvement as advisors, warriors, and leaders. For example, the Queen of Sheba is renowned throughout the Muslim world for converting her people to Islam. Qur'anic Surah 27:40–44 specifically recounts how she disregarded the advice of her male advisor to attack the Prophet and led her people to become Muslims. This is considered one of the most significant roles of an Islamic leader. The historical examples of women's participation in Islam are rich and varied, fortifying the argument that attempts to increase women's participation are well founded on Islamic tradition.

Like their counterparts in the West, women in Muslim countries face significant obstacles to achieving political leadership; however, of the handful of women throughout the world who have obtained the highest positions of political leadership, a disproportionate number come from countries with Muslim majorities. They include Prime Minister Hasina Wajed and Prime Minister Khalida Zia in Bangladesh, President Megawati Sukarnoputri in Indonesia, Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan, and Prime Minister Tansu Cillar in Turkey.

With the exception of Tansu Cillar, all are daughters or widows of former prime ministers. Their family connections enabled these women to assume their political positions. Despite the achievements of women from powerful political families, the overall level of Muslim women's participation in parliaments and other mid-level positions is still among the lowest worldwide.

To counter this low rate of participation, women are beginning to make significant strides in being elected on their own merits. In Bangladesh, Egypt, Turkey, Indonesia, Iran, and Pakistan, women have been able to build up their political profiles and assume formal political leadership roles as parliamentarians, cabinet members, and ambassadors. The leadership within some Muslim countries has also actively supported increased women's political participation. Under President Khatami, Iran's first female vice-president was appointed. President Musharef of Pakistan has reserved one third of the seats in all

local councils for women. Under Bangladesh's presidency of the UN Security Council in 2000, the importance of women's agency in peace and security was brought to the attention of the Council for the first time in its 50-year history; the Bengali Ambassador pushed the issue until the Council passed Resolution 1325, which insists on the full inclusion of women in peace processes. As in almost all societies, there remains a struggle for equitable representation of Islamic women in the upper echelons of government. Still, precedents of women's leadership in the Muslim world can be referenced as an argument for the integration of women into the Afghan political leadership. Indeed, without women's strong participation and presence in the political arena at this critical stage, the danger of neglect or a reversal of gender issues looms.

GENDER AND POLITICS RECOMMENDATIONS: TO ADVANCE WOMEN IN THE POLITICAL SPHERE

1. Afghan ministries dealing with women's affairs should be funded to increase their capacity and to strengthen their ability to train and raise political awareness among urban and rural women.
2. Taking into account the number of educated and experienced Afghan women who are qualified to take on decision-making roles, a substantial quota should be negotiated for women's participation, such as the 30% quota introduced in postconflict Bosnia and Kosovo.
3. Afghan women must be prepared for the Constitutional *Loya Jirga* and the 2004 elections through training on legal and constitutional issues and political processes.

THE INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

Addressing gender in Afghanistan, the international community must walk a fine line between being culturally sensitive and upholding international human rights standards. The Taliban movement was aware of this debate and defended their repressive antiwomen measures by arguing that advocacy for universal human rights discourse is an imposition of Western values. Opponents of women's rights repeat this argument. The international community can learn from the past and confront these claims by referring to Muslim women's legacy of leadership, and the Qur'an.

Policymakers may also draw upon a number of international conventions and pieces of legislation to fortify Afghan women's positions. Afghanistan has signed several international human rights conventions, including the 1978 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which recognizes the equal and inalienable rights of all people, regardless of gender, and the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The Beijing Platform for Action signed in 1995 by the majority of UN members (including many Muslim countries), specifically highlights the need for women's inclusion in all areas of public life.

The international community must model the behavior it is advocating by moving from simply calling on Afghan leaders to include women to actually implementing strong gender representation in their own agencies. Recognizing women as key players in decision-making processes in international organizations will help legitimize this role for Afghan women. The United Nations in particular needs to implement Security Council Resolution 1325, which calls on governments to expand the role of women in conflict prevention, conflict resolution, the implementation of peace agreements, and strategies for resettlement and rebuilding. The resolution requires the UN to include women at every level of its peace operations in Afghanistan, including in the leadership of its agencies and in its peacekeeping forces. This mandate was virtually ignored in the early post-Taliban decisions.

In addition, the international community could look to the guidance of Afghan and other Muslim women experts in areas such as international and constitutional law, economic development, and Islamic scholarship. These experts can provide key leadership for Afghans engaged in the rebuilding of their institutions. They can also advise and monitor the restoration of women's rights during the transition. Finally, international agencies can empower, legitimize, and assist Afghan women by employing large numbers of women from the local community and the Diaspora. They can avoid a backlash from traditionalists by consulting with local leaders, becoming educated about the cultural norms and sensitivities of the area, and ensuring that the community as a whole understands that they will benefit from these women's employment. Because of the extreme measures taken against women by the Taliban, the

world has taken notice of the need to restore Afghan women's rights. This highly publicized situation provides an opportunity for momentous progress on gender issues, not only in Afghanistan, but globally. To that end, those acting in this area must acknowledge that women's rights are always couched within a social, historical, and political context. Only when the international community commits to understanding the framework in which gender biases are imbedded will it develop tools to implement gender equity throughout the world. And only then will economic, social, and political stability come to the beleaguered women, and populace, of Afghanistan.

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