

Consortium on
Gender, Security & Human Rights



The Current Situation of Women in Afghanistan

Parvina Nadjibulla

Program Specialist on Human Rights, Peace and Security
United Methodist Office for the United Nations

**Consortium Lecture
October 20, 2003
Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University**

The Current Situation of Women in Afghanistan

Parvina Nadjibullah

- Personal/Professional Background
- Post-Conflict Reconstruction in Afghanistan
- Left Afghanistan in 1994, lived in Tajikistan until 1996
- Went to Moscow, Holland, then to Tajik mission to U.N.

Present Difficulties and Opportunities for Civil Society

- Especially in Afghanistan
- Rich history – over thousands of years
- Last chapter of this history: US use of force, then nation-building (with UN taking the lead role)

Key Features of a Just and Equal Society (from her writings on easel notepad)

- System of Representation
- Electoral system
- Checks and balances
- Vibrant civil society
- Free, independent media
- Civilian control of military and security forces
- Also, gendered component (CEDAW, Division Platform for Women)

UN SCR 1325

- An important focus of Parvina's work
- Landmark security council decision on women, peace and security (October 2000)
- Addresses the responsibilities of governments and non-state actors
- Those within civil society who worked on getting it on the agenda of the SC view it as international law even though it is adopted under chapter 6 of UN charter
- Afghanistan provided a good first case for implementation of 1325: Many short falls, though, in terms of implementation:
 - Gender advisor post in UNAMA only filled one month ago
 - Gender training not a major component of UN Security Assistance Force

- Lakhtar Brahimi, the SRSR for Afghanistan, known for not prioritizing gender considerations (Brahimi Report on peacekeeping lacks gender language, only one mention of it)

Bonn Agreement (December 5, 2001)

- Not a peace agreement among Afghan warring factions
- Lack of representation of important stakeholders
- (the Geneva Accords of 1988 also excluded important actors)
- Some positive elements: good gender language/called for women in decision-making positions (women appointed as Head of Ministry of Women's Affairs and Ministry of Public Health)
- Up to 80% of the cabinet are warlords
- Efforts to maintain ethnic balance without regard for democratic norms (example: son of a killed minister was given his father's position, officially as a way of maintaining ethnic representation – not a democratic process)
- Some factions throughout the country are not included in new government
- Loya Jirga – not democratic
 - Hamid Karzai elected by applause
 - Other candidates not given opportunity
- No security of any sort
 - Social sector reform – the buzz word, but in Afghanistan, there is no real security sector to reform
 - 100,000 armed men under warlords/regional commander
 - continuous fighting (recently in the north in Mazar-e-Sharif)



A lot of grievances still on the ground

- No DDR as of yet
 - A pioneering project – UNDP – in Kunduz should start this month (the first attempt of DDR in Afghanistan)
- Actual security (of individual people) completely lacking
 - This has been noted in various printed articles

Parvina's Blueprint (following her above critique of current system)

- One of many opinions among Afghans (noted saying: when you put 4 Afghans in one room you get 20 opinions)
 - Personal background/possible biases: A young women who was in Afghanistan until 1994 and then went to the West
1. Define borders: Durand Line/dispute with Pakistan
 2. Establish citizenship: have a census to determine % of population identifying with each ethnic group, determine the status of Kuchis (nomads living on the border with Pakistan)
 3. Establish security:
 - a. Greater presence of ISAF is needed, especially outside of Kabul
 - b. Combination of military/humanitarian assistance is currently not working (PRT)
 - c. German and Canadian military forces are coming in, which is good
 4. Full DDR
 5. Training of a national police force
 6. Actual elections: with registration of voters (Afghans are used to local elections, so federal elections should not be a problem)
 7. Justice
 - Those who have committed violence against the population for 25 years should not be in ministerial positions

2002 Signing of Good Neighbor Agreement: agreement to honor/respect boundaries of Afghanistan

- Women in Afghanistan over the last 25 years
- Mixed feelings over the use of force for “good”
- Stereotypes of Afghan women in U.S. – burka, Islam
- After 1964, women allowed to participate in public sphere
Through Soviet period, women's rights promoted strongly
A call of PDPA – more on Soviet model
RAWA – Maoist
70% of all teachers were women
40% of all health workers were women
- 1992: Soviet regime fell: in the civil war from 1992-94, increased incidence of gender-based violence

Q: Why did the turn to gender violence occur at that time?

PN: Because at that time the war turned into more of a civil war impacting both cities and rural communities

- War now between ethnic factions:
- Way to dishonor an Afghan man: control his woman and her dress (dishonor her as well) (explanation for some of the focus on the burka, and why it rankles when West focuses on it now)

Q: How does Islam play into war, nation-building?

PN: Afghanistan – deeply Muslim country

- Prior to 1979, Afghanistan was not an extreme society (patriarchal and traditional, yes) In 1979, development of Islamic jihad movement
- Because it was anti-Soviet it received much Western support
- One obvious way to see that - 4 Muslim banks in the world prior to 1979; now there are 4,000 Muslim banks
- Consequence of war: much more extreme understanding of Islam on ground
 - Over 50% of Afghan population is now under 18 – grew up under Taliban and mujahedeen interpretation of Islam
 - Much more religious population
- Some women are very traditional,
 - There is room to understand other models
 - Not a matter of either/or (full women's rights/Islam)

Q: If you had more power in the UN, in making a constitution, for what kinds of rights would you advocate?

PN: Recently a meeting of Afghan women in Kandahar produced a Women's Bill of Rights which was presented to Karzai and included a clear call for women's equality.

- Need to remember the work of Feminist Islamists
- Many Muslims believe that gender equality is fully compatible with Islamic teachings-- it's a matter of tapping into more progressive voices

Q: Can you explain why you say there is equality of women in Islam? What about Sharia?

PN: Many texts on the Sharia law are written by conservative men and are discriminatory against women, however much is being done by women living in Muslim majority societies to provide alternative perspectives that uphold principles of women's equality. Whether Muslim majority will fall toward extreme or progressive remains to be seen. It is important to consider the influence of neighboring states.

TN: What about madrasas?

PN: I went to school growing up in Kabul (but was an urbanite, very lucky to be able to go) Currently, there are some secular schools (places where children can basically gather and be taught a little bit)

- Teacher training programs are happening right now
- Madrasas provided not only education, but also food and shelter

Therefore, among poorest communities, sending sons to madrasas was common Now, attention needs to be paid to the madrasas in Pakistan. Approximately 2 million Afghans in Pakistan

Q: I want to push you further on your blueprint: Self-identification, security guarantees... is there a phase/process to achieve these guarantees?

PN: Once the other items in the blueprint are in place, then yes.

- Border issue: up to 4 million people (kuchis) live on the border
- Who is an Afghan right now?
 - How to create a government on ethnic lines if you don't know who is making up the country?
 - Citizenship should be based foremost on Afghanistan (national) identity, not ethnic tribe
 - 9 northern provinces (of 30 total) – Tajik and Uzbek dominated, and will not accept Pushtun rule

Q: Youth are the majority of the population. Do you have information on how they define their identity? How would you identify yourself in a census?

PN: By religion and language

Since 1747, Afghanistan has been united. There are no independence movements among ethnic groups in Afghanistan. No desires to separate. But now, we need to guarantee minority rights. Post conflict peace-building can provide an opportunity for greater minority rights/rule of law.

Biography

Parvina Nadjibulla is a program specialist on human Rights, Peace and Security at the United Methodist Office for the United Nations. She is a member of the UN NGO Working Group on Women, Peace and Security at the United Nations, the NGO Committee on Disarmament and the Executive Board of the NGO Committee on the Status of Women. Parvina serves on the board of Women for Afghan Women, the only organization in the NY metropolitan area dedicated to helping the Afghan women in the large Afghan community in Queens, NY. She has a Masters degree in International Affairs from Columbia University School of International and Public Affairs. Parvina is a native of Afghanistan. Prior to coming to the United States, she lived in Tajikistan and Russia. In Tajikistan, she worked with the International Peace Foundation as a humanitarian relief coordinator.