

Fall 2002, Vol. 9, No. 2

The Afghan Equation**By: Hekmat Sadat**

Despite optimistic moves and passionate speeches by the Transitional Administration of Afghanistan, there is no doubt that in the post-Taliban environment a basic problem facing national reconciliation and democratization is the continued lack of gender equity. This inequity is partially due to the lack of educated and professionally experienced women who had not fled from the fanatics. For the most part, the sentiments of the Taliban era preventing equal distribution of socio-political functions still permeate. There are high barriers to structural and institutional entry and many risks of public reputation and personal injury. By removing the burqa, the issues did not get resolved; it merely brought all the unresolved dialectics to the surface. Since it cannot be hidden away, the issues must be addressed with rational, equitable and equal measures. Education is one way that these barriers may be reduced.

Education must take place on many levels. First, men must be educated about the benefits of emancipating women and their role in society. Second, women need to be educated in universal, technical, and vocational training. In addition, a support system needs to be established such as a kindergarten and distance learning via satellite television or radio for rural or strict family units. These variables are all part of an elaborate social equation.

Afghan society under Taliban rule presented an awful image of apartheid against women and intelligentsia. Many can still remember the 13-year-old Nahid who jumped off the fifth story Macro-Rayan Apartment balcony so the warlords' men would not rape her. In fact, there is a statue created in her memory. In addition, few can forget the live image on CNN of the execution of an Afghan woman, Zarmina, before a crowd forced to watch at Ghazi Stadium. Although times are much better for urban women, a recent story told of women teachers in rural areas having acid thrown on them similar to episodes that have occurred in Bangladesh. Rumours exist of Afghan girls being trafficked and coerced into prostitution into newly created brothels in the border cities of Pakistan. These egregious criminals are ideological terrorists who believe that women are solely for the pleasure of men, or are commodities to be possessed and protected against social transformation.

Of primary importance, men must be educated about the benefits of emancipating women and their role in society. For over a decade now (actually two decades if we consider the refugee camps), women in Afghanistan have lived under a system of gender apartheid because the social norms prescribed such a lifestyle. This lifestyle manifested during the Taliban as women were not only confined to the burqa but also virtually imprisoned in their homes with the windows painted black. The poor economic conditions fed into the apartheid against women.

Now, men need to be told that there is no basis for the exclusion of women. While it is interesting that Islam never deprived women of their political rights, the interpretation of related

rules by fanatics have always advantaged men and denied women their given rights. Since illiteracy is high, most men cannot read and write properly let alone engage in philosophical dialogue or Islamic jurisprudence. Therefore, the few semi-literates hijack the religion and adulterate the Afghan way of life. In a sense, educating men about women relies mostly on educating men about their own religion.

Women must also be educated particularly in universal, technical and vocational training, because it is widely understood that schooling is related to the socio-political system and to the general culture of a society. Many from my generation grew up with the phrase, "knowledge is power". This is exactly the reason the Taliban forbade education of women; they feared the awakening of the social consciousness. Education will provide a chance for social mobility, political ascendancy, or at least a sophisticated rational voice if women are still locked out of the system.

While Afghan women, whether in Afghanistan or among the Diaspora, are prepared to enlist in the women's rights movement Afghanistan is in no way ripe for the broader feminist movement. Any change agents in Afghanistan must be culturally sensitive in order to be effective and attract people to their struggle. Although the intensity of opposition to women's emancipation and participation in society has diminished many-fold in the post-Taliban era, there are still deep-rooted views that women have an inferior position and must play a subordinate role. The limited role of participation is a complete disregard to the needs and contribution of women by Afghan men.

A support system must be established for this new education, and must include kindergartens and distance learning via satellite television, video, or radio for rural and strict family units. Kindergarten serves mainly to improve behaviour and prepare children for formal schooling. However, it is during the story telling and reading/writing exercise when democratization, gender equality, and most notably nation building is instilled. Most importantly, kindergartens serve as a complementary variable to women's education. If women are to attend any type of schooling, they will need a reliable place to leave their children. Women's education is nearly impossible without the idea of kindergartens. Furthermore, if the family demands that the woman remain at home, then satellite television, videos, and radio broadcast need to be utilized as distance learning instruments. This might be the best temporary approach as it will be most feasible and social acceptable given the current attitude towards women's emancipation.

Nation building is not just wearing the traditional costumes of the various ethno-religious subpopulations or appointing their warlords into the administration. It does not come by placing women sparsely throughout the civil service. Nation building has a far broader meaning. The nation-building project must eliminate all ethno-religious and gender differences and create a homogeneous Afghan nation. Using all instruments available to it, from schooling to telecommunications and cultural activities, the state must lead social and cultural transformations from a mini-state identity to one defined as an Afghan-state identity with equality for all. Optimism and words are important but the transitional administration needs to match their words and the hope of the people with meaningful progressive policies and enforcement. The journey is long and treacherous but with commitment to the cause and the right know-how it can be accomplished.

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