Making a Difference for Afghan Women

"We must be courageous and speak out on issues that concern us. We must not bend under the weight of spurious arguments invoking culture and traditional values. No value worth the name supports the suppression and enslavement of women. The function of culture and tradition is to provide a framework for human well being. If they are used against us, we will reject them and move on. We will not allow ourselves to be silenced."

Dr. Nafis Sadik, Beijing 9/95

By canonizing traditional and cultural restrictions on women and girls into official policy and law, the Taliban leadership of Afghanistan has created the most notorious example in the world of state denial of basic rights of women and girls. It is little consolation that these regulations are enforced unevenly at different times and in different parts of Afghanistan. The dilemma faced by concerned individuals and agencies is in finding a strategy that will result in real and lasting improvements in the lives of Afghan women. Righteous indignation and distant protests are inadequate.

While Taliban restrictions on women bear some resemblance to apartheid in their denial of fundamental human rights to a majority of the population of a country, it is dangerous to use the language of 'gender apartheid' to guide an advocacy policy for women in Afghanistan. South Africa is not Afghanistan. Apartheid South Africa was an economically and technologically advanced country; it was dependent on foreign trade for survival, and it shared many cultural values with the West. Afghanistan is the least developed country in Asia. Devastated by decades of war, it has a primitive agricultural economy and negligible trade links with the rest of the world. Its culture and belief systems look more to the "truths revealed" in the 7th century than to "international standards negotiated" in the 20th.

A prolonged social and economic boycott of South Africa contributed to positive change within the country. An economic boycott of Afghanistan would hardly be noticed by its leaders. Were it to be compounded by a cessation of humanitarian assistance, there would definitely be suffering for the women and children already victimized by Taliban policies. There is also no reason to believe that such suffering would sway the convictions of the Taliban leadership or force them to comply with international standards. The Taliban believe that they answer to God and therefore are prepared to make inordinate personal and national sacrifices to follow their view of the deity. For the international community to have any impact on Taliban policies, dialogue and engagement at the most fundamental and pragmatic levels is required.

The experience of humanitarian aid agencies working in Afghanistan is that there is hope and there is a way forward. Through a patient process of active engagement on practical and concrete issues, humanitarian success stories have been made. Examples include:

- a Taliban edict prohibiting women from directly receiving humanitarian assistance has been nullified.
Twenty thousand widows in Kabul are now able to receive monthly rations of food from CARE and ICRC without fear of reprisal; a Taliban edict restricting all female health care to one dilapidated hospital in Kabul was resisted by international aid agencies. The Taliban amended their policy and now allow women to be seen in special sections of all hospitals.

In at least five provinces controlled by the Taliban, provincial authorities have given permission for girls to be educated and women to work in schools. Thirty five percent of the students in CARE-supported schools in Taliban areas are girls and 14% of the students in Swedish Committee schools are girls. There are numerous examples of women being allowed to work both inside and outside of the health sector. Through CARE projects alone over 50 women work as clerks, distributors, monitors, community development agents, teachers and teacher trainer.

In response to queries from NGOs and the Taliban Ministry of Mines and Industry, the Taliban Ministry of Justice issued a fatwa (judicial decision) declaring that widows are allowed to work outside the home as long as they observe modesty in clothing, and married women can work if they have the permission of their husbands.

Building on what is known about the values and beliefs of the Taliban, their organizational structure, and the positive lessons learned by relief and development agencies in Afghanistan, we can find a way forward for a brighter future for Afghan women. Using a strategy of positive engagement, international relief and development agencies can:

- build appropriate roles for women into all projects implemented in Afghanistan;
- turn conflicts and problems with Taliban authorities into opportunities for dialogue and change;
- understand the Taliban frame of reference and help them understand the social and humanitarian implications of some of their policies;
- practice and communicate international norms of human rights in our own hiring and management policies to show by example that they are consistent with core Islamic teachings.

One positive contribution that the Taliban have made is in bringing to the attention of the world the brutal and repressive nature of many traditional gender practices in Afghanistan. The Taliban did not invent these practices and they would not go away even if the Taliban were to be removed from the scene.

By living what we preach, international relief and development agencies can and do make lasting improvements in the lives of women in Afghanistan. A cancellation of these programmes would be a true tragedy for the women of Afghanistan; they would lose the voice and support of the only agencies that are able to make positive changes in their lives.

Yours etc.
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