Burqa Politics: The Plights of Women in Afghanistan
By Lina Abirafeh

Visions of Afghan women throwing off their burqas in the name of freedom helped fuel the Bush administration's case for war against Afghanistan. Just how free are women in today's Afghanistan? Was removing their burqas ever really the issue?

"Because of our recent military gains in much of Afghanistan, women are no longer imprisoned in their homes. They can listen to music and teach their daughters without fear of punishment. The fight against terrorism is also a fight for the rights and dignity of women." - Laura Bush

Has the US military campaign restored "rights and dignity" to Afghan women? Just over two years ago, the public was inundated with media images of Afghan women casting off burqas, taking to the streets, returning to work. Many would argue that these images were not entirely accurate, and that conditions for women are in fact regressing. In today's Afghanistan, women are struggling to be heard and to find alternatives to living in despair. Only a fraction of women - and only those in Afghanistan's cities - are accessing economic opportunities and are able to support themselves and their families.

Over two years into the reconstruction process, conditions for women in Afghanistan remain challenging - an illiteracy rate of 85 percent, female-headed households living in dire poverty, and an inability to access training and economic opportunities. The full extent of the situation for Afghan women is still unknown due to the absence of reliable statistics and data. What we do know is that Afghan maternal mortality is still the highest in the world, and women's life expectancy (age 43) is among the lowest in the world. While the world's focus remains on Kabul and we are inundated with images of girls going to school, the reality is that 80 percent of Afghans are living in rural areas where schools for girls continue to be burned. Aid agency reports are being issued, warning of increased violence and the effect of what might happen if donor nations fail to fulfill promises of aid - a replay of the years following the Soviet pullout in 1989, when the international community abandoned Afghanistan to years of tribal warfare.

A BRIEF HISTORY LESSON
Afghan women's rights have been highly contested throughout history - linked to modernity and progress on the one hand and preservation of tradition on the other. Researcher Huma Ahmed-Ghosh aptly states, "Afghanistan may be the only country in the world where during the last century kings and politicians have been made and undone by struggles relating to women's status." Much more complex than existing formulations of pre- and post-Taliban, Afghan women's history and women's rights have been and continue to be highly politicized and central to Afghan conflicts.

Starting in the late 1800s, Afghan leaders have attempted to engineer social transformations by implementing liberal laws for women. Some of these include the earliest attempts at emancipation and social reform in the Muslim world. In the 1920s, King Amanullah sought to drastically transform gender relations by enforcing Western norms for women. These reforms were met with violent opposition, and were quickly replaced by more conservative measures. Similar attempts were made during several other periods in Afghan history, all with strong opposition from conservative forces. Despite incremental changes, women's rights vacillated between enforced modernization and conservative backlash.

During Soviet occupation (1979-1989), further reforms were made, following a Soviet model. Opposition to Soviet reforms for women fueled a fundamentalist movement that took hold in refugee camps. This in turn served as the grounds for the mujahideen opposition to expel the Soviets and regain control both of women and Afghanistan. This period is known for its violence towards women in the form of rapes, abductions, and restrictions on mobility.

Historically, Afghan women have repeatedly found themselves caught between externally-driven Western concepts of modernization and Afghan codes of culture. These enforced attempts to improve their status have led to violent, fundamentalist reactions and left women worse off than they were before.
IMAGES & PERCEPTIONS: FACT VS. FICTION

Researchers, analysts, aid workers, and Afghan women alike feel that the predominant Western image of Afghan women was that of victims behind blue burqas in need of liberation. The perception was that all Afghan women are "battered and abused, relegated to a horrid and invisible position in society," explains Sarah Takesh, Creative Director of Tarsian and Blinkley, a for-profit social venture training Afghan women in updating and marketing Afghan clothing designs. "I think most people still think so," she added.

Violations of Afghan women's rights began to take on an increasingly prominent role in the justification of the US bombing campaign in Afghanistan. A recently published online letter by Jenna and Barbara Bush, written to support their father's campaign and to reach out to young voters, lauded Bush's "decision to liberate the women of Afghanistan." The military campaign "to liberate the women of Afghanistan" was launched alongside support for many of the former Northern Alliance factions that have a history of oppressing women.

All of this "liberation" is taking place in a climate that is relatively unfriendly to Islam. Islam continues to be represented as incompatible with human rights, leaving ample room for the West to justify "saving" Afghan women. In Afghanistan, inaccurate and facile analyses were made connecting women's oppression to Islamic practices. In fact, contrary to common understandings of the role of women in Muslim contexts, norms governing women in Afghanistan are based on tribal codes. These tribal codes trump Islamic laws—particularly in the case of Islam's more enlightened messages on women. It becomes increasingly difficult for women in Islamic countries to convince the world that they are able to act on their own behalf in a context of pre-determined international opinion about the status of women in Islam.

BEHIND THE BURQA

There is no agreed-upon measure of social change or progress for women in Afghanistan. From the perspective of the international media, the burqa has often taken on a symbolic role as the barometer of social change. Yet the burqa, or any act of veiling, must not be confused with, or made to stand for, lack of women's agency. Further, the Talibian are not the inventors of the burqa. The garment existed prior to Talibian rule and was used by the urban elite to allow increased mobility. It is repeatedly argued by Afghan women that generalizations on the 'situation of women' based on visible transformations such as burqa are not constructive. More important indicators exist "behind the burqa," so to speak.

The burqa initially brought much attention to Afghanistan. It continues to play the most prominent role for the Western media, producing documentaries, articles, and photographs claiming to offer a glimpse behind/under/beneath the burqa. This unconstructive image of Afghan women serves only to feed the stereotype of the backwardness of Afghan society. Even President Bush coined a new term- "women of cover" - to further divide women who wear veils and burqas from those who don't. The image of the burqa-clad Afghan woman prevents the international community from seeing Afghan women as possible active participants in their own futures, explains Rachel Wareham, Head of Mission of Medica Mondiale in Afghanistan.

The media's expectation was that there would be a mass casting-off of the burqa following the US military campaign. Media reporting followed suit, claiming that burqas were thrown off at every opportunity following the fall of Mazar-i-Sharif on November 11, 2001. "The reports were not true," wrote Kate Clark, a BBC correspondent in Afghanistan prior to and during the fall of the Talibian, in a recently published book on aid in Afghanistan. "But for journalists and editors who assumed that unveiling was the main preoccupation of Afghan women living under the Talibian, it must have seemed obvious that they would throw away their burqa at the first chance."

THE RHETORIC OF LIBERATION

The international community and the Western media hardly took notice of the situation of women in Afghanistan until the fall of Kabul on September 27, 1996. It was the Talibian who, ironically, drew world attention to the situation of Afghanistand Afghan women. Following the US military campaign in Afghanistan, aid agencies poured into the country with women's issues at the top of their agendas. "Liberating" women appeared to be the development order of the day. Their belated 'discovery' of the discrimination of Afghan women—discrimination that passed largely without comment during previous
Afghan women have long-established mechanisms by which they have achieved gains in the past. Images of Afghan women as victims serve a strategic purpose but tell little about women's realities, serving only to dislocate them as historical and political actors. Research has demonstrated that feminism did not need to be imported; it had always existed in Afghanistan. An important step would be to understand such mechanisms and to help Afghan women to use them for their own "liberation."

GETTING WORSE WITH IMPROVEMENT
Valentine Moghadam, a researcher on Afghan women, points out that "many Afghan women leaders and outside observers have felt that women's rights and needs have been given only lip service [and] that funding for Afghanistan's reconstruction and women's advancement was inadequate." Jeanne Bryer, Humanitarian Officer for the British Agencies Afghanistan Group (BAAG), warns that "we may exacerbate problems by trying to improve things." She believes that Afghan women have not been sufficiently consulted prior to interventions, nor are agencies sufficiently accountable to them. Gretchen Bloom, gender consultant and former head of the Program Unit at the World Food Program in Afghanistan, elaborates: "Many programs have been designed with Western notions of feminism and/or women's perceived appropriate status. When Afghan national staff, both women and gender-sensitive men, have been allowed a voice, the correct historical perspective was taken into consideration."

Many organizations in Afghanistan are working to engage women's perspectives and to involve men in similar programs. However, most organizations are subject to international priorities and donor decrees, with little room to input local realities. The result is an emphasis on Afghan women that extracts them from their social context and interrelationships. Excessive references to "Afghan women" as existing in a vacuum serve to disrupt gender dynamics and to create new tensions between men and women.

Numbers are used to measure the success of programs for Afghan women. These indicators drive funding, and projects that achieve their numbers are touted as a success. Dawn Sparks-de la Rosa, a Resettlement Expert at the International Catholic Migration Commission, argues that this should not be the case. "Progress should be slow, especially in a country like Afghanistan," she says. Funding for projects supporting Afghan women has declined dramatically in the last year. Available funding continues to be difficult to access and comes with pre-determined donor priorities. "A lot of aid defined job training as its specific focus," Sparks-de la Rosa explains. "But how many tailors can there be in Kabul? And how many women can be carpet-weavers - a profession that has exploited Afghan women for years. Aid comes and goes and carries with it the whim of agencies who reset their priorities based on funding available. They work to please their donors, not the women they are helping."

Rachel Wareham concludes that Afghan women are very strong and capable, yet there will be hard times ahead. "The international community continues to support cultural relativism and are afraid to do what women really ask for. Afghan women themselves are not necessarily conservative. It's the decision-makers - including the international community - who are.”

LEGALLY BOUND
Although Afghanistan's new Constitution - approved in January 2004 by the Afghan Constitutional Loya Jirga (Grand Assembly) - secures women's rights and ensures equality before the law, many Afghan women fear
that these words may not reach the right ears. Human rights and women's rights organizations have begun to identify fissures in the document where women's rights may vanish. Afghanistan is also a party to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), signed without reservation in March 2003.

Women comprised 20 percent of the delegates to the Constitutional Loya Jirga. With their help, several articles protecting their rights were passed. Article 7 requires Afghanistan to observe the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and all covenants to which Afghanistan is a party. Article 22 guarantees the legal equality of men and women. While it might be touted that women were present and active in the Loya Jirga, this should not overshadow the fact that these women expressed concern for their safety on the streets and at home in addition to the harassment they experienced at the event itself.

National divorce laws have been revived, and women are beginning to exercise this right. Women who are abused or whose husbands are reported as missing are now able to divorce within Afghan law. The Kabul Family Court has granted approximately 40 divorces for women this year.

Presidential elections in Afghanistan are scheduled for October 9. In the past few months, a major campaign has been launched to bring women to the polls. This entails a poster campaign, but little else, Sparks-deIa Rosa explains. "Women should be called in a meeting forum at a local mosque or school so that they can learn about their rights. From what I know nothing of this sort was ever done... As a result, many women will not vote since they may view it as a 'man's duty.'" In a country with little history of or faith in central government, exercising civic duty is not a priority. In discussions of women's role in politics, one woman told me, "What good is politics? Look at where it has brought Afghanistan."

Current security risks in Afghanistan have made voter registration a difficult task. Violence has increased in recent months, and agencies are concerned about sending staff to rural areas. The recent deaths of female election workers has slowed the registration process. Further, the process is a lengthy one as most women will need to be approached individually and within their own homes, Gretchen Bloom explains.

Although many women have registered, true representation is a challenge. It is unlikely that women will vote differently from the men in their household, and men will vote to keep themselves secure. Jeanne Bryer explains that "most rural areas have commanders whose word is law, and no one would be likely to vote against the commander's preferred candidate for fear of persecution. In other words, both women and men will do what they are told."

TOO LITTLE, TOO LATE
Experience in other contexts such as Bosnia has revealed that violence against women often increases in the immediate aftermath of a conflict. Afghanistan may very well fall into this pattern. However, increased violence against women in Afghanistan could also be construed as a reaction to the high-profile focus of development agencies on women in the country. Women's human rights are still being violated across Afghanistan; reports of self-immolation and violence against women at home and on the street have increased in the last year. Despite reports that have been released about women's continued and increasing abuse, Rachel Wareham explains that there is hardly any funding to combat violence against women. And certainly no one is accepting responsibility for possibly perpetuating the increased violence. Dawn Sparks-de la Rosa explains: "There were several cases known to me where women were being abused by their husbands for taking classes and participating in women's workshops. Some women became scared and stopped attending. Fathers, brothers, husbands were never involved in any of the programming activities."

The media and international agencies only present opposite sides of the spectrum: the few heroines who have attracted the media's fickle eye, and the oppressed masses who remain victims. Even this limited picture of Afghan reality fails to capture media attention today. Isolating Afghan women - from the burqa-clad to the lipstick-wearer - is not the best way to make changes and achieve gains. Focus on Afghan women is lessening, leaving the masses with a false perception that Afghan women have been "liberated" and our task now lies elsewhere. In Iraq, perhaps.
Recently returned from research in Afghanistan, Jeanne Bryer asked an Afghan man what his assessment was of Afghanistan's future. His response was, "I work to hope." She understood his answer to mean that an opportunity seems to be lost again. "The world focused on helping Afghanistan after September 11; money was allocated, promises were made, thousands of internationals including heads of state, the UN, media, aid agencies, and businesses arrived and made pronouncements - but things are most definitely going backwards again," explains Bryer. "Rural areas are bereft of assistance due to lack of security and the country is awash with guns and drugs. Corruption is rife from top to bottom, political parties are rife with ethnic division; there are power struggles, shifting alliances, and underlying violence threatening to rip the country apart once more. Everyone suffers, including women. All any of us can do is 'work to hope' - and continue doing what we think is right from a humanitarian point of view. We need to try to understand and learn with humility what Afghan women think is right for them. This would be the right thing for us to do."