

Petition to Support the Afghan Women's Network

Saturday 3 December 2011, by [TAX Meredith](#) (Date first published: 2 December 2011).

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I have been working on women's human rights for many years, most recently with the Centre for Secular Space [1], a new global think tank formed to oppose religious extremism, strengthen secular voices, and ensure that the rights of women, gays, and religious minorities don't disappear from view in the rush to make peace with Islamic fundamentalists. Ever since stories started appearing about Karzai wanting to negotiate with the Taliban and the US backing him up, we have been worrying about what would happen to Afghan women. The Afghan Women's Network [2] has developed a terrific demilitarization program but nobody here seems to have heard about it, while some of the men in the US State Dept. consider women's rights a "pet rock" to be discarded when serious negotiations begin [3]. I wrote a blog about this [4], but what good is a blog?

Seeing Peace Unveiled on PBS [5] and hearing that Afghan women were being excluded from the Bonn conference, which begins Dec. 5, sharpened my sense that something awful was about to happen. So I wrote another blog [see below]. It felt about as effective as putting a message in a bottle. But by this time, a lot of other people were taking initiative; pressure mounted; emails started flying; and the global network Women Living Under Muslim Laws put out a very strong statement denouncing "the ethical incoherence of States that engaged in a devastating war in Afghanistan under the fallacious pretext to protect 'poor oppressed Muslim women living under the burqa', and now prevent them from participating as full-fledged citizens in the peace process in their country, all while engaging with their oppressors," and calling for women and progressive forces everywhere to use "all possible media avenues in support of Afghan women's claim to full participation in the negotiations." [6]

The next day, thirteen women were suddenly included in the Afghan delegation to Bonn. Two days later, the Afghan Women's Network sent out an update saying that, as a result of concerted domestic and international pressure, the official delegation was now 31% female. However, these women were added at the last minute and had not been consulted about what would happen at the Bonn conference. In addition, fifteen women have been added to the Peace Council, but these women were handpicked by government people, including warlords. In short, "real meaningful participation of women at all levels is still very minimal."

By then the Bonn meeting was just a week away. There wasn't enough time to pull together a big coalition of women's and human rights groups, or to get a list of celebrity signatures that might impress the State Dept. But at least we could do a global petition [7]. Ariane Brunet [8] in Montreal and I worked on the text; we got input from others in our network; and the petition went up late Tuesday night. It is now starting to reach international listserves. If we get enough signatures, maybe we can convince our governments to actually listen to the Afghan women's demands. Please sign, link on FB, tweet, and forward to your friends!

Meredith Tax

Friday, December 2, 2011 - 17:08

Afghan Women Excluded

Monday, November 21, 2011 - 23:08

On December 5, less than two weeks from now, the second conference on Afghanistan will convene in Bonn, ten years after the first one installed the Karzai government. It will include all the usual suspects—Afghan governmental bodies, foreign governments, and representatives of Afghan civil society—with one big exception. Despite some pressure—who can say how much?—from the State Department, and the clear and cogent demands put forth by the Afghan Women's Network, no Afghan women's groups or representatives have been invited. As Human Rights Watch points out,

"The Afghan government's key donors and facilitators of the conference, including Germany and the United States, do not appear to have made women's rights a priority for the meeting." This is despite Hillary's promise not to abandon Afghan women, and the fact that support from the German Greens—who are members of the government—helped build the Afghan Women's Network.

When you consider that the Taliban's treatment of women was a pretext for this war, these facts are staggering, if not surprising. The recent broadcast of "Peace Unveiled" on PBS's Women, War & Peace series shows the kind of opposition Afghan women activists are up against and how unreliable US support for them appears. It's an important program and series, very much worth watching, and all the episodes can be viewed online.

Despite all the talk about UN resolution 1325, people in the US, even most feminists, have not focused on this problem. I wrote a blog last July saying how important it was to support the demands of the Afghan Women's Network. To my surprise, I was asked if I wanted the war to go on forever—as if the only two choices were between endless war or betraying Afghan women.

To accept this is to accept the idea that the only meaningful form of US action is military. President Karzai (who changes his tune frequently) has been all over the papers saying how much he wants a continued alliance with the US, meaning we should keep giving him lots of money. Are we to put no conditions on this aid, let human rights go out the window, and, in the name of respecting cultural differences, keep financing a corrupt regime with an attitude towards women and gays barely different from the Taliban's?

Could the Obama administration perhaps show a little principle here? A little backbone?

Gayle Tzemach Lemmon posted an article today in Foreign Policy called "Afghan women are not 'pet rocks'" (referring to a dismissive remark by a State Department official). I am cross-posting it below and hope you will forward this and link to it widely because there has been so little media attention to this. Let's try to generate some pressure here.

Meredith Tax

Afghan women are not “pet rocks”

By Gayle Tzemach Lemmon

Monday, November 21, 2011

Afghan women have long fought for a say in their country's future, but that fight has grown more urgent in the run-up to the Bonn Conference, a gathering charged with laying out a plan for Afghanistan for 2014 and beyond.

So far, women's battle to win a substantive role at Bonn - and any other peace talks that may come to the capital - has gained little traction either at home or abroad. And in the US, those backing women say they face an uphill fight convincing the Obama Administration to speak out more about the need for women's participation.

Afghan women leaders have issued press releases and formal position papers in the run-up to December's meeting demanding that civil society makes up 30 percent of Afghanistan's delegation to the Bonn Conference, with women accounting for half of that group.

The Afghan government has not yet announced its official delegation, but so far one man and one woman from civil society have been invited to Bonn, with the woman getting three minutes to address the plenary. Of the sixteen women attending a separate civil society forum, only one will have access to the official conference, according to the Institute for Inclusive Security, which recently brought Afghan women leaders to Washington to press their case on the Hill and with the Obama Administration.

“We would like to have strong participation in these processes, we would like to know what is being discussed, what is put on the table,” says Orzala Ashraf, a peace activist and founder of an Afghan NGO for women and children. “We would like to ensure that these bargaining chips (in any peace process) are not women's rights or our achievements of the past ten years.”

With the U.S. and its NATO allies focused on extricating themselves from Afghanistan, the task of laying out the path ahead has assumed extreme urgency for Afghans. “It is of high importance for women's groups and civil society to make sure their voices are included in any road map,” says Ashraf, “in any direction that Afghanistan is going to take.” But whether those voices will be heard remains an open question.

As Human Rights Watch noted, “The Afghan government and its international backers say that women's rights are one of their ‘red lines’ as they plan for the withdrawal of international forces. If this is the case, why are Afghan women struggling to get a seat at the table in Bonn?”

Those in Washington attribute part of the reason to a White House inner circle that sees the role of women as far removed from the issue of Afghan security. As the Washington Post famously noted earlier this year, women are seen as “pet rocks in our rucksack” that are “taking us down.”

“These guys don't get it,” said a senior administration official who has argued that women's participation is crucial for Afghanistan's stability, as then-Secretary of State Colin Powell did in

2002. "Ten years on we still have to make the case that women are additive."

As I've written in these pages, it is far from the situation of a decade ago when leaders across Washington fanned out before the cameras to speak about the importance of supporting Afghan women. After five years of Taliban rule, in which women were denied the rights to work and education and to leave their homes, the international community offered its arrival in 2001 as a new start.

Secretary of State Clinton helped women leaders win a speaking role at last year's Kabul Conference and has promised women that "we will not abandon you," but with her departure imminent and 2014 looming, talk of a Taliban return is surging.

Fears of what the Taliban's ascendance would mean for women have only grown stronger with news of the stoning death of a woman and her daughter in Ghazni Province. Assassinations of leading human rights supporters and police officials and attacks on girls schools have skyrocketed in recent years - even as talk of a peace deal with the Taliban has come to be viewed in NATO capitals as the best option for ending the war.

Some American advocates for women say any talk of Taliban negotiations is misplaced, especially given the recent assassination of former President and head of the High Peace Council, Burhanuddin Rabbani.

"We don't think anybody should be negotiating with the Taliban," says Esther Hyneman of Women for Afghan Women, which runs family centers and safe homes for abused women across Afghanistan. "If the Taliban wanted a role in the government, why don't they run for parliament in a democratic election? They don't want a role in the Afghan government — they want the Afghan government."

Women's group leaders say that just like in the 1990s, when they lobbied to stop the Clinton Administration from recognizing the Taliban government, they will not stand by quietly while women half a world away are denied their constitutionally guaranteed rights to work and education. They note that Afghan women are making progress for themselves, pointing to the rising number of girls attending school, as well as female midwives, police officers, lawyers, entrepreneurs, civil society activists, parliamentarians and educators as evidence.

"We will keep the pressure on and support women in any way we can," says Eleanor Smeal of the Feminist Majority Foundation, which helped to lead the fight against Washington's recognition of the Taliban in 1996. "There is now a huge network of non-profit organizations within Afghanistan and we are talking to them and they are taking the lead. What we can do is continue to put pressure on the U.S. government not to agree to anything that omits half the population."

Yet some wonder just how committed the White House is to supporting women's participation in their country. The President has not spoken often about Afghanistan - and far less about the country's women.

"Perhaps the tremendous unpopularity of the war puts [President Obama] in an awkward position," says activist Mavis Leno, wife of talk show host Jay Leno and one of the women who put the issue on America's map — and in PEOPLE Magazine in 1998 — after the Taliban came to power in 1996. "I don't think he is doing as much as he could."

Hyneman goes further:

"I am at my wit's end at the lack of discussion by the media, by our government, by our president on the issue of women's rights in Afghanistan." Of Obama, Hyneman says, "I am appalled that he has

not mentioned Afghan women's rights since his speech on withdrawing US troops."

Women's activists say they are watching closely to see exactly what the Afghan government — with support from the United States — agrees to in any peace deal.

"I just don't understand why the fate of these women has to be considered as special pleading," Leno says. "Are we just going to stand back and see this happen again? Women were making it a little way up the hill; can we at least make sure that they don't slide back down again?"

They say they share Americans' desire to end the country's longest war, but that a peace that leaves women out will not last.

"We are in favor of peace, but this is not the road to peace, it is the road to bloodshed and subjugation and civil war, a repeat of the years past," Hyneman says. "Everyone will be sitting in front of their TV sets wringing their hands as we see women brutalized."

P.S.

* <http://www.meredithtax.org/taxonomyblog>

Footnotes

[1] <http://www.centreforsecularspace.org/>

[2] <http://www.afghanwomennetwork.af/>

[3] <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/03/05/AR2011030504233.html>

[4] <http://www.meredithtax.org/taxonomyblog/afghan-women-and-taliban-over-you-hillary>

[5] <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/women-war-and-peace/full-episodes/peace-unveiled/>

[6] See on ESSF (article 23562), [Afghan women excluded from the 'peace process' at the Bonn Conference!](#).

[7] <http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/support-demands-of-afghan-womens-network/>

[8] http://www.womensrightscoalition.org/site/about/workinggroup_en.php