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An Afghan Feminism

By Michael Gerson
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Being an educated, professional woman in Afghanistan could not have been easy at any time during the last few decades. I recently met with a group of female government officials, brought to Washington by USAID and the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council. One, during the Taliban years, had run an underground school in her home for the criminal purpose of teaching girls. Another had built a community development program employing 25,000 Afghan women before she was put under close guard by the Taliban. Her home was looted, and her children were threatened with kidnapping.

Afghanistan is a country where women have made significant progress -- but only compared with a comprehensively oppressive past. There are now about 2 million girls in school, when six years ago only a million children were in school. The women I met now play public roles in education, public works and agriculture -- unimaginable under the Taliban.

Yet Afghanistan is also a nation where girls have had acid thrown in their faces while walking to school and female police officers and public officials have been targeted for assassination. Taliban and foreign extremists seem to take a particular interest -- the kind of interest Freud could explain -- in the intimidation, repression and humiliation of women.

And patriarchal attitudes are not confined to the fringes. The Shiite family law, recently passed by the Afghan parliament and signed by President Hamid Karzai, legalized marital rape and restricted the travel of women. (Under domestic and international pressure, the law is being revised.)

Afghanistan remains one of the most difficult places on Earth to be a woman. A reaction of anger and militancy would be understandable. But the Afghan women I met take a different approach. Uniformly, they argue that "education" is the most important response. By education, they do not mean only literacy. "People need to be educated in the values of our own religion," says Rahela Hashim Sidiqi, a senior adviser at Afghanistan's civil service commission. "They need to learn from other Islamic countries, such as Indonesia and Bangladesh. Even in Arab countries, education is not denied."

The main challenge, says Sidiqi, is "the lack of education about Islam itself, particularly in rural areas where culture and Islam are mixed. People don't see the difference between tradition and religion." These women talk of the Koran's teaching on property rights and respect for women as a source of progressive reform within Afghan culture. They speak with particular respect for Khadijah, Muhammad's wife, who, they argue, was educated and conducted business while married to the prophet. And they identify a number of prominent Afghan imams who defend these views. "They are the key," says Sidiqi. "We need a positive approach."

Clearly, this is a different kind of feminism. Rather than asserting an individualistic conception of rights, these women are arguing for respect and legal protection from within their religious tradition. They do not

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seek to overturn a cultural order but to expand and humanize it. "If it shows respect to wear a scarf," says Sidiqi, "I wear a scarf." "We respect other people -- and we expect respect." This conservative approach to social change may be the only one that works in a deeply traditional society.

The rights of Afghan women are not always seen as at the forefront of American interests. Some foreign policy "realists" seem open to an accommodation with Islamist groups in Afghanistan that would sacrifice human rights in the cause of stability. Some conservatives seem to view all nation-building as social engineering -- beyond our capability and beyond our concern.

These women offer a practical rebuttal. They point out that the reconstruction of Afghanistan will not take place without the knowledge and skills of 52 percent of its population. They believe that women in Afghanistan possess the political advantage of being untainted by past warfare and corruption; that they represent a chance for Afghan politics to start anew. And they have seen, according to Sidiqi, "that women are always fighting for the rule of law, because women and children are hurt most when there is no rule of law."

Why should America, in the midst of a costly war, care about the rights of Afghan women? Because Afghanistan, without the participation of women, will remain a failed and dangerous state.

And there is another reason -- because the betrayal of courage always matters and always dishonors those who commit it. The dignity of women is not the only reason America fights in Afghanistan -- but it is a good one.

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