



International

War Complicates U.S. Aid Efforts for Afghan Women

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By Rich Daly
WeNews correspondent

A U.S. effort on behalf of women in Afghanistan is gearing up, but it comes in tandem with a controversial escalation of the war that some women's rights activists consider a greater threat. The first of two stories on the Afghanistan war and women.

WASHINGTON, D.C. (WOMENSENEWS)--What do women's rights and a U.S. military surge have in common?

In Afghanistan--where the United States is stepping up a war that has turned particularly deadly in July, with at least 63 international military service members killed so far this month--both are getting more funding.

And that combination is proving controversial within the women's rights community.

The Feminist Majority, based in Arlington, Va., publicly supported the Obama administration's approach of both security stabilization and redevelopment of Afghanistan.

"Virtually everyone knows that a military solution alone won't work," wrote Eleanor Smeal, president of the Feminist Majority, in a recent online post. "Yet, we cannot ignore that security and the Taliban are among Afghans' top concerns."

Orzala Ashraf Nemat, a leading civil society and human rights activist in Kabul, disagrees with the U.S. troop buildup.

"As an Afghan woman I feel the military is definitely not the solution for this war," Nemat told Women's eNews recently. "Look at what is happening with the troop increase. This year there is more violence and more fighting and more threats from the opposition to the government, more suicide bombings. Women and children are the main victims of fighting and war. What we need is long-term commitment. The Afghan army should be allowed to lead operations by themselves . . . We have seen that in seven years the capacity has not been built."

Code Pink Targets Buildup



Afghan women walk past U.S. Army soldier.

Pfc. Richard W. Jones Jr., U.S. Army, Courtesy of www.army.mil, Creative Commons



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Jodie Evans, co-founder of Code Pink, the anti-war women's group with offices throughout the U.S., is a vocal critic of the Obama administration's decision to increase the U.S. military commitment to the war from 38,000 troops to 59,000 troops by the end of 2009.

"We're quite concerned that Congress is hiding behind the skirts of women to fund the war," Evans said

So far this year, Congress has approved \$130 million for women's programs on health care, education and job training. That's up from an annual average of about \$34 million between 2001 and 2008.

In addition, Melanne Verveer, the State Department's global ambassador on women's issues, announced in June a \$26 million grant program to provide assistance to nongovernmental organizations that assist Afghan women.

Evans, however, says the \$130 million in women's aid approved this year and the \$1.5 billion in total humanitarian aid planned for each of the next five years is tiny compared to the \$40 billion also approved in 2009 to fund the growing military offensive against the Taliban.

The imbalance between war funding and developmental aid has been criticized by some lawmakers, such as Rep. Raul Grijalva, an Arizona Democrat, who called for implementing the classic counterinsurgency dogma of 80 percent funding for "political" aid and 20 percent for military assistance.

Major Aid Goes to Military

Instead, 90 percent of the recent supplemental appropriation for Afghanistan was for military support.

By the 80-20 ratio, Evans says, U.S. development aid should increase to \$200 billion annually. "We're trying to show the absurdity of saying that development is the answer and then using the military as the answer," she said.

In addition to regular protests at military installations throughout the United States, Code Pink has launched repeated pushes by its membership to urge Congress to increase the ratio of development aid to Afghanistan.

The rising military commitment has drawn criticism from other women's right groups as well, such as Madre, an anti-war, pro-development group based in New York City, and Women for Women International, another aid group for women fleeing war zones, based in Washington, D.C., and London.

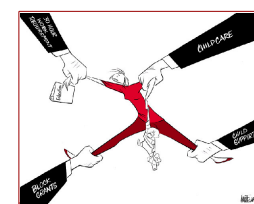
Sweeta Noori, Afghanistan country director for Women for Women International, told a May meeting of the Congressional Progressive Caucus that the vast majority of women in Afghanistan have seen no improvement in gender-based discrimination and violence, despite highly-touted improvements in the nation's laws.

Sonali Kolhatkar, co-director of the Afghan Women's Mission, part of the International Humanities Center, an international organization that promotes humanitarian projects in Afghanistan, recently fired off an online protest against the idea that the United States has served as a bulwark for women's rights in the nation since it toppled the Taliban eight years ago.



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Aside from changes--such as a requirement that women comprise a quarter of Parliament's members--embodied in the Afghan Constitution, women's rights have actually deteriorated as a direct consequence of deliberate U.S. policy, including alliances with warlords hostile to women's rights, according to Kolhatkar.

"Additionally, the U.S. war has fueled a misogynist insurgency that has only gotten stronger and worsened anti-woman sentiment," Kolhatkar wrote.

Aunohita Mojumdar contributed interviews from Kabul. Rich Daly is a writer in Washington, D.C. Aunohita Mojumdar files from Kabul.

Women's eNews welcomes your comments. E-mail us at editors@womensenews.org.

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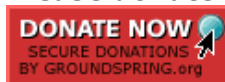
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