



Saving Afghan Women from the "Liberators"

By Patricia DeGennaro

The Obama Administration acts as though George Bush abandoned Afghanistan for Iraq and, therefore, an infusion of troops and money will solve the country's massive problems. But, argues the author, the international community is already engaged and intent on supporting Afghan women. Lasting change must come at the hands of Afghan women themselves—and Afghan men.

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Feminists everywhere are justifiably enraged at the suffering of Afghan women. Following the Taliban's fall, there was a rush to alleviate the plight of Afghan women and girls, backed by millions of dollars in aid. The Ministry of Women's Affairs and Afghanistan has been overrun by hundreds of organizations trying to help. Unfortunately, most are not very successful.

Although the Obama Administration is continuing the past policy of supporting Afghan women (and Congress recently approved \$150 million for women's health, education and capacity-building), this policy also includes war and a large supplement to fund it. Thus, anti-war feminists are at odds on how to continue their support. The [Feminist Majority Foundation](#) has no intention of abandoning the Afghan women's cause regardless of hostilities, while [Code Pink](#) is questioning the motive of United States support for Afghan women, stating, "Congress is hiding behind the skirts of women to fund the war."

Each organization has a point, but both miss the much larger problem surrounding this mission.

I do not support the current Obama initiative to bring in more troops, nor do I believe the international community should walk away. Although I am not anti-war, neither do I think that anyone can "save" Afghanistan. I do believe, however, that the international community's massive intervention must be reviewed and revised in a comprehensive manner. Failing that, everyone should just go home.

Afghanistan is the benefactor of the largest collective international intervention in history. Billions have already been donated or pledged to support the war and the country's internal development.

A variety of players are competing for money and resources, but only 10 percent of it goes to actual development. Forty percent finds its way back home while another chunk is siphoned off by corruption.

Currently, there is little to no coordination of development efforts and no basic plan on how to apply whatever funds are obtained. Everyone is dancing to their own fiddler, watching tons of money pour down countless drains.

During my first trip to Afghanistan, I couldn't believe how anything got done. We were all locked down behind the barricades. When I was finally able to leave, I visited the Ministry of Women's Affairs, where the first words from the minister's mouth were, "Please help me organize these donors. I have no idea who is doing what, and they are everywhere."

She wasn't kidding. Everywhere, there were groups involved in "saving women" without even asking what the Ministry needed.

For its part, the Obama Administration doesn't seem concerned that this chaos might have contributed to the massive failure in policy over the last eight years. In fact, this "new policy," which includes adding 38,000 additional troops by the end of 2009 while simultaneously increasing civilian support in Provincial Reconstruction Teams has mayhem written all over it.

I'm reminded of the movie *My Cousin Vinny*, when Joe Pesci turns to Marisa Tomei and says, "Let me see, what else can we pile on? Is there any more S--- we can pile on to the top of the outcome of this case? Is it possible?"

The bottom line is that the international community must better manage its efforts to ensure that they positively impact and empower Afghan women. Donors are so keen on seeing themselves as liberators of these "poor women" that they too often fail to see that this is not just about the Taliban.

President Karzai has supported women simply through rhetoric. He has promised repeatedly to appoint more women ministers and nominate them to the Supreme Court, but has reneged on both. Worse, he signed the "[women's law](#)," which essentially legalized *rather than criminalizing abuse*.

Karzai is appointing dangerous warlords who do not respect women's rights and also pursuing a peace agreement with the Taliban. Feminist organizations must take their resources and work all sides of this equation. Perhaps Karzai should hear from these groups about a campaign to remove him from office instead of allowing him to use women as ballot stuffers.

Helping women in Afghanistan has never been easy, so it must be strategic. Abdur Rahman Khan, who ruled Afghanistan from 1880-1901, was the first monarch to allow his wife to be seen without a veil. This and his quest to bring progressive changes to Afghanistan sparked a rebellion that eventually cost him his crown. Any time reforms are initiated too quickly, or directly oppose traditions, Afghans tend to respond ruthlessly – as they did when the Soviets tried to impose progressive decrees that changed women's status. What followed was the comprehensive suppression of women's rights during the Mujahedeen and Taliban eras.

Although international rhetoric is on target, current policy is not. "Most men think that when the US speaks of gender, it is about increasing the power of women while decreasing the power of men," a male parliamentarian told me last year. "That is why they [women] are threatened." Of course this is simplistic. There are men that support women's education and employment. On the flip side, there is the age-old tradition of *Purdah* (segregation) and the dreaded burka, which many women are forced to wear.

There are small organizations that have been highly successful, patient and stealthy in helping women obtain healthcare, build skills and create businesses to sell their goods. These are Afghan-focused, Afghan-run and sensitive to Afghan culture. And many of them know that they must work with the men and boys as well. It would serve us well to learn from them.

Much of the work that needs to be done in Afghanistan involves not just women, but also the government, military, donors and the Afghan men themselves. Focusing entirely on women and girls is counterproductive, especially if men continue to grow up thinking their wives should be controlled and hidden from sight in the house.

"If you give in to their [women's] needs today, they will ask for a divorce tomorrow," a male Wolesi Jirga member informed me. Only when everyone recognizes women's value will they truly be safe, secure and allowed to better contribute their skills and talents to both their families and communities.

Feminists worldwide should continue to support Afghan women, not abandon them. The issue, however, is that women's programs can receive all the money in the world, but if it's not used holistically and responsibly, nothing will change, and the goal of empowering women will be for naught.