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## **A History of Women in Afghanistan: Lessons Learnt for the Future Or Yesterdays and Tomorrow: Women in Afghanistan**

By Dr. Huma Ahmed-Ghosh<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

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. Recently, the situation of women under the Taliban rule has been center stage. The situation of women came to symbolize to Western military powers a justification of war in the name of freedom of women. But the situation of women in Afghanistan today is not only the result of the Taliban's policies. There is a history over the centuries of women's subjugation. Even in more recent times the Mujahideen's<sup>2</sup> (1992-1996) record is worse than the Taliban's. Thus, one must approach the analysis of women's situation in Afghanistan, not through the ideological formulation of 'before and after' the Taliban, but within the larger historical context of Afghanistan. Only such a perspective can ensure that women will be seen as integral to the rebuilding of the Afghan nation.

In this paper, through recounting the history of women in Afghanistan, I want to position women for the future through lessons learned from the past. The focus of this paper is on the importance of rural Afghanistan in the shaping of the nation and on women's status. Rural Afghanistan is the root of tribal powers that have frequently doomed Kabul-based modernization efforts. Social traditionalism and economic underdevelopment of rural Afghanistan have repeatedly contested the center (Kabul), thus a better understanding of tribal controlled areas is essential to empower women in these regions. For women in rural Afghanistan, control over their lives and gender roles is determined by patriarchal kinship arrangements. These kinship relationships are derived from the Quran and tribal traditions where men exercise unmitigated power over women. While Islam is deeply entrenched in the country, a hybridized compromise of Islamic and secular ideals of gender relations, along with economic reconstruction of rural Afghanistan will be proposed as a process towards enhancing women's status.

I argue that today, Afghanistan's economic marginalization, social disorder, and political dislocation can be conceptualized as "deficiencies" that women can maneuver to their advantage. Under the current conditions women could redefine their roles in the family and community in ways that improve both their and the nation's lives. Although economic reconstruction is primary, this reconstruction can be connected to wider social change and to building political democracy in ways that include women on new terms. In other words, Afghanistan's economic bankruptcy creates opportunities to renegotiate the division of labor along gender lines and to argue against the continued exclusion of women from the paid labor force. Afghanistan's social development can only be ensured through democracy and the reduction of poverty, the success of both being assured through full participation of women, especially in rural Afghanistan.

In this paper I trace the history of women in Afghanistan for three main reasons. One, to show that women in Afghanistan were not always oppressed by fundamentalism as occurred under the Mujahideen and the Taliban.<sup>3</sup> Two, to show that women's issues were an integral part of national

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<sup>2</sup> The Mujahideens, which translates to freedom fighters, supported by the USA, Iran, and Pakistan fought against the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan.

<sup>3</sup> Henceforth, the Mujahideens and the Taliban will be referred to as Afghan fundamentalists.

construction agendas even as early as the 1920s. Three, to highlight the power of tribal/community leaders in defining the role of women and in successfully resisting any modernization that would challenge their patriarchal authority. This paper chronicles Afghanistan's political history to highlight the sporadic efforts made to empower women in an attempt to create a sense of nationhood. This is essential to explore because the political and powerful nature of tribal dictates in the Afghan countryside, and the oppositional ruling parties and elite are instrumental in determining the scope of women's lives. Women in Afghanistan are not an isolated institution; their fate is entwined with and determined by historical, political, social, economic and religious forces. In addition to a range of internal tensions, outside or international political forces have impacted Afghanistan in significant ways.

Two critical epochs in Afghan history have shaped gender dynamics and affected women's status in Afghanistan. The first period took place during the reign of Amanullah in 1923 and included rapid reforms to improve women's lives and women's position in the family. The reforms met with widespread protest and contributed to the ultimate demise of Amanullah's reign. The second period occurred under the leadership of the communist-backed Peoples Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA). This leadership forced an agenda of social change to empower women that led to the ten-year war between Afghanistan and the Soviet Union, the birth of the Mujahideen, and the decline of women's status. Despite the defeat of these reforms, the two eras provide evidence that Afghanistan has had a history of progressive efforts to provide women's rights and develop the basis for a more egalitarian society. At the same time, this historical review brings to light the significance of the rural/urban divide in Afghanistan. While Kabul has historically been the cosmopolitan center and will continue to lead the push for modernization in the future, any economic development must also include changes in the structure of power in rural regions. Such structural transformations are essential to the improvement of women's status in Afghanistan and can only happen when the countryside becomes an integral part of Afghanistan's new plans for economic development.

### **Brief Background**

Afghanistan is very rugged in its topography and various ethnic, religious, and tribal groups sparsely populate it. According to Magnus and Naby (1998) the population of Afghanistan is approximately 14 million. The largest ethnic groups are Pashtuns at 40 percent and the Tajiks at 20 percent. The next largest groups are the Hazaras, Uzbeks and Aimaq. Both spatial and ethnic impenetrability has prevented Afghanistan from ever forming a consensual and coherent sense of nationalism. In addition, interference by western countries and countries bordering Afghanistan have contributed to the fragmentation of the Afghan polity. In many instances, tribal politics is still determined by ethnic loyalties to bordering states. Although there have been sporadic attempts to bring dissenting tribes together, at no point has the Afghan nation experienced a strong centralized state with a common legal system. (Moghadam, 1997) Instead, rival ethnic groups have had political ambitions to capture Kabul and, through well-armed tribal leaders (supported by external funds), created their own sovereignties. Ethnically based rivalries, combined with open and varied interpretations of Islam, have created fractious cultures.

The impact on women has been especially harsh, since women's lives have often been used as the raw material with which to establish ethnic prominence. Tribal laws and sanctions have routinely taken precedence over Islamic and constitutional laws in deciding gender roles, especially through kinship hierarchies in the rural regions. Tribal power plays, institutions of honor, and inter-tribal shows of patriarchal control have put women's position in jeopardy. Tribal laws view marriages as alliances between groups; women are pawned into marriages and not allowed to divorce, total obedience to the husband and his family is expected, and women are prevented from getting any education. Women are

perceived as the receptacles of “honor,” hence they stay in the domestic sphere, observe the veil and are voiceless. The honor of the family, the tribe, and ultimately the nation is invested in women.

Moghadam (1997:76) accurately points out that, “the issue of women’s rights in Afghanistan has been historically constrained by (a) the patriarchal nature of gender and social relations deeply embedded in traditional communities and (b) the existence of a weak central state, that has been unable to implement modernizing programs and goals in the face of “tribal feudalism.” In addition, as I will argue, foreign interference by the British, Soviet Union and the United States of America, dating to the 1880s, critically impeded social development in Afghanistan. In the following section I will show how tribal leaders blocked reform efforts that aimed to separate women’s identity from that of her family and tribal community, and ultimately any attempts at modernizing the state.

### **Modern Monarchies**

The birth of modern Afghanistan is attributed to Abdur Rahman Khan who ruled from 1880 to 1901. He was descended from a line of Pashtuns who largely controlled Afghanistan. Amir Abdur Rahman was the first ruler to attempt consolidation of the nation into a centralized state. He ruled with a ruthless hand that led to him being termed the “Iron Amir.” Yet, Abdur Rahman tried to change some of the customary laws that were detrimental to women's status. For instance, he abolished the custom forcing a woman to marry her deceased husband’s next of kin, raised the age of marriage, and gave women rights to divorce under specific circumstances. In accordance with Islamic tenets, women were given rights to their father’s and husband’s property. Even though Abdur Rahman considered women subservient to men, he still felt that they were “due just treatment.” (Dupree, 1986) Nancy Hatch Dupree surmises that his liberal wife Bobo Jan may have influenced the Amir, pointing out that, “In fact, she was the first Afghan queen to appear in public in European dress without a veil. She rode horses and trained her maidservants in military exercises. She had a keen interest in politics and went on numerous delicate missions to discuss politics between contending parties.” (1986:12)

Upon the death of Abdur Rahman, his son Amir Habibullah Khan took over and reigned for 10 years. Habibullah continued his father’s progressive agenda by putting a ceiling on extravagant marriage expenses that often caused poverty in many families. His wives were seen publicly unveiled and in western clothes. In 1903, Habibullah established the first college in Afghanistan, Habibiya College, employing foreign teachers from India, Turkey and Germany. His other achievements included the setting up of the first hospital, the first hydroelectric plant, factories and construction of roads in Afghanistan, and improved trade with Russian central Asia and India. (Gregorian 1969; Magnus and Naby 1998; Dupree 1973)

Habibullah’s most important contribution to Afghanistan was the return of Afghan exiles, and specifically that of Mahmud Beg Tarzi around the turn of the century. If there is a single person responsible for the modernization of Afghanistan in the first two decades of the twenty-first century it was Mahmud Beg Tarzi. He returned from Syria to found and edit a modernist-nationalist newspaper, the *Siraj-ul-Akhbar-i Afghan* (the lamp of the news of Afghanistan). Between 1911-1918 he advocated modern education and political views critical of western imperialism as well as, in subtle ways, the monarchy. (Magnus and Naby, 1998) Educated in Syria and Turkey, Tarzi was strongly influenced by modern interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence and by the liberties afforded to women in these countries. Convinced of women’s abilities to engage in public professions, Tarzi viewed women as people who deserved full citizenship; he claimed that educated women were an asset to future generations and concluded that Islam did not deny them equal rights. In his newspaper *Seraj-ul-Akhbar*, Tarzi devoted a special section on women’s issues entitled “Celebrating Women of the World,” which

was edited by his wife Asma Tarzi. As Schinasi (1979:36) concludes, “no one before Tarzi had pronounced such words as ‘liberty’, ‘respect for the homeland and religion,’ ‘union’, ‘progress’, or ‘school’.”

Habibullah, due to Tarzi’s liberal influence, opened a school for girls with English curriculum which tribal leaders and mullahs saw as going against the grain of tradition. Unfortunately, as Magnus and Naby (1998:39) points out, “the liberalization of the nation through education and modernization of even the ‘tiny elite’ spawned an opposition movement.” Education for women, and state’s interference in marriage institutions challenged the power of tribal leaders and their patrilineal and patrilocal kinship systems, resulting in Habibullah’s assassination in 1919. Schinasi (1979:26-27) sums up Habibullah’s reign perfectly, “Habibullah is sometimes referred to as the forgotten king. But it was Habibullah who was keen to maintain Afghanistan’s position on the international as well as on the Muslim scene, but he was unable to control both with the same skills.”

### **The First Era of Change**

The assassination of Habibullah placed his son Amanullah on the throne marking the full-fledged modernization period of Afghanistan, as we will see later. Amanullah’s first task was to completely liberate Afghanistan from the British. He succeeded by defeating the British in the third and final Anglo-Afghan war in 1919. Amanullah was relentless in his attempts to modernize Afghanistan. His modernizing agenda included the liberation of women from tribal cultural norms. His enthusiasm and persistence in enforcing these changes were heavily influenced by the modernization agenda operating in Turkey and his impressions from his travels in Europe.

In 1923, Amanullah drew up the first constitution, establishing the basis for the formal structure of the government and setting up the role of the monarch within the constitutional framework. (Magnus and Naby, 1998) Amanullah was also influenced and encouraged by Mahmud Tarzi in his endeavors. Tarzi was specifically instrumental in designing and implementing changes pertaining to women through his personal example of monogamy, education and employment of female family members and their unveiled public appearances. His daughter Soraya later married Amanullah. Another daughter of Tarzi’s married Amanullah’s brother. Thus, it is not surprising that Tarzi’s sophisticated and liberal intellectual ideology blossomed and concretely embedded itself in Amanullah’s reign.

Amanullah publicly campaigned against the veil, against polygamy, and encouraged education of girls not just in Kabul but also in the countryside. At a public function, Amanullah said that Islam did not require women to cover their bodies or wear any special kind of veil. At the conclusion of the speech, Queen Soraya tore off her veil in public and the wives of other officials present at the meeting followed this example. Throughout her husband’s reign, Queen Soraya, wore wide-brimmed hats with a diaphanous veil attached to them. (Dupree, 1986) Many women from Amanullah’s family publicly participated in organizations and went on to become government officials later in life. An example is Amanullah’s sister, Kobra, who formed the Anjuman-I-Himayat-I-Niswan, (Organization for Women’s Protection) in the early 1920s. This organization encouraged women to bring their complaints and injustices to the organization and to unite to contest the oppressive institutions. Along with her mother, Soraya also founded the first magazine for women called Ershad-I-Niswan (Guidance for Women). Another sister of Amanullah founded a hospital for women. Women were encouraged to get an education and in that attempt 15 young women were sent to Turkey for higher education in 1928. Soraya was very instrumental in enforcing change for women and publicly exhorted them to be active participants in nation building. In 1926 at the 7<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Independence, Soraya in a public speech delivered said,

It [Independence] belongs to all of us and that is why we celebrate it. Do you think, however, that our nation from the outset needs only men to serve it? Women should also take their part as women did in the early years of our nation and Islam. From their examples we must learn that we must all contribute toward the development of our nation and that this cannot be done without being equipped with knowledge. So we should all attempt to acquire as much knowledge as possible, in order that we may render our services to society in the manner of the women of early Islam. (Dupree, 1986: 46)

In 1927-1928 Amanullah and his wife Soraya visited Europe. On this trip they were honored and feted. In fact, in 1928 the King and Queen received honorary degrees from Oxford University. (Stewart 1973) They were very impressed by Europe and also by the changes in Turkey. On their return to Afghanistan they tried to implement some of the social and cultural changes they had experienced abroad. This was an era when other Muslim nations, like Turkey and Egypt were also on the path to modernization. Hence, in Afghanistan, the elite was impressed by such changes and emulated their development models. However, the time was not right. Presumably, the British distributed pictures of Soraya without a veil, dining with foreign men, and having her hand kissed by the leader of France among tribal regions of Afghanistan. (Stewart, 1973) Conservative mullahs and regional leaders took the images and details from the royal family's trip to be a flagrant betrayal of Afghan culture, religion and 'honor' of women. One can take the circulation of such images from foreign sources as evidence of British efforts to destabilize the Afghan monarchy, the first of many international attempts to keep the country in political, social and economic turmoil. When the royal family returned, they were met with hostility and eventually forced out of office.

Amanullah tried to consolidate Islam and state policies, but faltered when he tried to impose rapid changes pertaining to women's status. Many conservative Afghans in the rural areas felt that the reforms were too "western" for their society and the forced changes were against the doctrines of Islam. People in the countryside were unable to comprehend the changes being imposed on them in haste, especially since men saw these changes as challenging their familial and tribal authority. Resistance was strongest to the abolition of bride price and polygamy, and to the introduction of education for girls. The 1920s were thus the time that conflicts between the elite modernists and traditionalist tribes began to surface. The main bone of contention was the changing status of women. What broke the proverbial camel's back for the traditionalists and rural population was the institution in 1924 of the freedom of women to choose their own partners and attempts to abolish bride price. Fathers of young women saw such progressive laws as a loss of social status, familial control and financial security.

By 1928, the ethnic tribal leaders in the rural regions grew restless and developed coalitions to protest the freedoms women were experiencing in Kabul. It should be pointed out here that in this period women in tribal and rural areas outside of Kabul did not receive the benefits of modernization. Tribal leaders controlled not only their regions, but through inter-tribal unity, held sway over most of the nation in resisting attempts at modernization. The Loya Jirga,<sup>4</sup> finally put their foot down when marriage age of girls was raised to 18 years and for men to 21 years, and polygamy was abolished. They also opposed the education of girls, and by the late 1920s forced Amanullah to reverse some of his policies and conform to a more traditional agenda of social change. Schools for girls in Kabul and in rural areas were closed down, and women had to revert to wearing the veil. As Moghadam (1997) points out, women could not cut their hair, mullahs were given unlimited powers to institute their agendas and the old tribal system was to be reinstated. Amanullah even married a second time (for a brief period) to pacify the opposition, but it was too late. (Stewart, 1973) Nevertheless, pressures on Amanullah mounted, and in 1929 he was forced to abdicate and leave the country. Gregorian (1969:243) asserts that, "Amanullah, determined to improve this situation [the status of women] and maintaining that his support of the

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<sup>4</sup> A group of tribal leaders and elected officials coming together to democratically arrive at decisions.

feminist cause was based on the true tenets of Islam, took more steps in this direction in his short rule than were taken by all his predecessors together.” Amanullah was ahead of his time; his liberalism in an era when Afghanistan was barely united in a sense of nationhood was traumatic for the state.

The next two decades saw the Afghan royalty change hands with different families and leaders, but not again a leader who would push the reform and women's agenda to the detriment of their rule. Following the exile of Amanullah, a series of rulers introduced conflicting laws regarding the status of women. From total abrogation of gender equality laws under Amir Habibullah II, a Tajik (who ruled for a period of nine months after Amanullah), to Nadir Shah who ousted him, women saw in the 1930s and 1940s a cautious introduction of rights. In 1931 Nadir Shah announced the second Constitution. He opened some schools for girls and tried to bring about some gender-based reforms but was careful to avoid conflicts with the mullahs and tribal leaders. Despite his cautionary approach to women's rights, Nadir Shah was assassinated in 1933 and Zahir Shah came to power.

### **Post-Monarchy Period**

By mid-century, with massive foreign aid and technical assistance from the Soviet Union, Afghanistan embarked on a modernizing journey. By the late 1950's, a need was perceived for women to be economically active to help Afghanistan achieve its targeted development goals. Women's issues were once again given some consideration. The then Prime Minister Mohammad Daoud did not want to repeat the haste and mistake of his predecessor Amanullah and declared veiling a “voluntary option.” By now women were expected once again to abandon the veil, marriage expenses were curtailed, and women were encouraged to contribute to the economy. The 1940s and 1950s saw women becoming nurses, doctors and teachers.

In 1964 the third Constitution allowed women to enter elected politics and gave them the right to vote. The first woman Minister was in the health department, elected to the Parliament along with three other women. In 1965 People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan (PDPA), a Soviet-backed socialist organization was formed. The same year also saw the formation of the first women's group, the Democratic Organization of Afghan Women (DOAW). The main objectives of this women's group was to eliminate illiteracy among women, ban forced marriages, and do away with bride price.

### **The Second Era of Change**

The second era of intense women's reform occurred in the late 1970s. The 1970s saw a rise in women's education, faculty in the universities, and representatives in the Parliament. (Dupree, 1986) The year 1978 saw the rise to power of the controversial PDPA. It is during the PDPA rule that rapid social and economic change, echoing some of the 1920s themes, was implemented and mass literacy for women and men of all ages was introduced. (Moghadam, 1997) Massive land reform programs, along with abolition of bride price and raising of marriage age were also part of the PDPA agenda. In October 1978 a decree was issued with the explicit intention of ensuring equal rights for women. Minimum age of marriage was set at 16 for girls and 18 years for boys. The content of decree number 7 and the coercion of women into education were perceived by some as “unbearable interference in domestic life.” (Hanne, 1990) Again, the revolutionary pace of social change caused concern among the mullahs and tribal chiefs in the interiors. They viewed compulsory education, especially for women, as going against the grain of tradition, anti-religious and a challenge to male authority. As Moghadam (1997) reports, incidents of shooting of women in western clothes, killing of PDPA reformers in the rural areas and general harassment of women social workers increased. As Marsden (2002:24) points out, “The PDPA's use of force in bringing the changes to fruition, combined with a brutal disregard for societal and religious sensitivities, resulted in massive backlash from the rural population.”

Interestingly, or ironically, during this turbulent “democratic” Soviet-supported regime women's issues moved center stage and implementation of reforms was enforced, up to a point. During this era women were employed in significant numbers in Universities, private corporations, the airlines and as doctors and nurses. But for the nation as a whole, it was a period of anarchy and destruction. Beginning with the Soviet occupation in December 1979, Afghanistan witnessed a decade long war. Fueled by external forces, funding, and political interests by the United States, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and China, the Mujahideen fought against the Soviets. The Afghan countryside was the breeding grounds for these “freedom fighters.” Suspicious of the Soviet socialist agenda to annihilate the traditional culture and religion of Afghanistan, the Mujahideen was able to gather forces to form their own revolutionary army. Their battle cry was a war in the name of Islam, emphasizing a reversal of all socialist policies including those that guaranteed women liberties through education and employment.

In 1989, when the Soviets left Afghanistan, the country was in disarray and became the site for civil war with the government transfer of power in 1992. That year the Mujahideen took over Kabul and declared Afghanistan an Islamic state. According to the US Department of State (1995), “In 1992 women were increasingly precluded from public service. In conservative areas in 1994, many women appear in public only if dressed in a complete head-to-toe garment with a mesh covered opening for their eyes.” This was only to be the start of the apartheid against women. As the author of *Zoya's Story* (2002:63) claimed, “Far from rejoicing that the Russians had been defeated, Grandmother told me that a new worse Devil had come to my country. There was a popular saying around this time: “Rid us of these seven donkeys and give us back our cow. The donkeys were the seven factions of the Mujahideen, and the cow was the puppet regime [Najibullah who was installed by the Russians before they left].” According to Zoya (2002), the Mujahideen entered Kabul and burnt down the university, library and schools. Women were forced to wear the burqa and fewer women were visible on television and in professional jobs. The period from 1992-1996 saw unprecedented barbarism by the Mujahideen where stories of killings, rapes, amputations and other forms of violence were told daily. To avoid rape and forced marriages, young women were resorting to suicide.

Later in 1996, the same consortium (U.S.A., Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia) supported the Taliban to counter the “mismanaged” politics and “unexpected” brutalities of the Mujahideen. Initially a sense of relief was palpable. But it was extremely short lived, and very soon the Taliban set up *Amar Bil Maroof Wa Nahi An al-Munkar* (Department for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice) to monitor and control women's behavior. The Taliban made sweeping changes in the social order and used the radio to broadcast its new laws (televisions were banned). Daily, Radio Sharia reminded the citizens of their duty to the country and Islam, and listed the changes men and women needed to make to conform to the new fundamentalist regime. For women, this meant no longer being able to go outside except to buy food. If women did leave home they had to be accompanied by a mahram (male relative). Women had to wear the burqa and no makeup or fancy shoes. White shoes were forbidden since that was the color of the Taliban flag. Women and girls could not go to school nor visit male doctors. Not unlike the Mujahideen, the Taliban too indulged in forced marriages and rapes. On the liberation of Kabul in November 2001, Zoya (2002:226) states, “No one was sorry to see the Taliban defeated, but neither did they rejoice when the Northern Alliance [mainly Mujahideens] took over. They too had blood on their hands.”

Thus the two so-called progressive eras of the 1920s and 1970s, while attempting to improve women's status were not only unsuccessful but also led to violent, fundamentalist backlashes by subsequent governments. In both periods, tribal leaders who objected to the redefining of women by the state and the diminution of their general authority initiated the disruption of the modernization process. These patterns of resistance to change focused on conditions for women suggest that future efforts to



“modernize” in Afghanistan will only succeed with full recognition of the multiple conflicts, fissures and resistances to change. Though the first era saw a despot implement change (undeniably favorable to women), the second era saw a socialist-democratic but equally authoritarian regime forcibly impose change. As desirable as many of these changes may have been for Afghanistan, in neither situation were rural communities of Afghanistan involved. These issues remain important today when once again a limited national government and international pressure demand radical changes in women’s status. In the next section, I explore particular ways that fundamentalist beliefs, especially about women’s location in the family both limit and provide opportunities for women’s involvement in social change.

### **Women ‘Fundamental’ to the Family**

Any discussion of women in Afghanistan today must also reflect the shift in global politics since the 1980s. Over the past twenty years the spread of Islamic fundamentalism has created a pan-Islamic culture that exerts itself through state control. This powerful state ideology has been intensified by the Western response to 9/11 further strengthening the anti-Western ideology leading to deeper Islamization of the Middle East and Asia.<sup>5</sup> Given this global situation, combined with the recent bankruptcy of left politics in the Middle East and Asia, plus the impoverishment of democratic governance, fundamentalism has been further fuelled in the region.

Fundamentalism is a much-contested term. In recent years, the term fundamentalism in recent years has attained a political connotation where it is now defined by the West to describe societies that are Islamic. I make this point because Westerners do not refer to the Indian state as being fundamentalist even though it has a right-wing Hindu government in power. Therefore, for the West, fundamentalism is not just about states that are not secular, liberal and individualistic but also those that are Islamic.

Ironically fundamentalism (including western Christian fundamentalism), though played out differently in culture-specific ways in all belief systems, lays out almost identical proscriptions for all women. As Hawley and Proudfoot (1994:4) point out for American Protestants, “Family is the natural home of religion, women in the family are its pivotal personality and principal guardians.” They continue, “Fundamentalist religion idealizes women, she is the self-sacrificing wife, and mother whose hands are little sullied by the business of running the external world.” Similar points could be made about Islamic fundamentalism.

Helen Hardacre (1994:118) points out that, “Religion as a cultural force in human history has been remarkably powerful in establishing long-lasting, influential motifs of gender.....Religions invest the family with sacred significance, and this extends to gender and interpersonal relations. The family is the primary unit for ritual observance as well as an influential site of religious education and the transmission of religious knowledge from one generation to the next.” To ensure that patriarchy is maintained, family is reinforced along gender hierarchies to ensure the transmission of religion, culture and family values from mothers to children. Yet idealization does nothing to improve women's material states since the concept of motherhood is glorified and not the actual mother. Clarifying and embedding gender roles within the family becomes a strategy ensuring power and control of women by men within the structures of traditional patriarchy. Threatening this safe haven is projected as destruction of the very fabric of society. These cultural symbols ratify fundamentalist rules from women to society in general.

Despite the apparent increased oppression that women have encountered with the emergence of fundamentalism in many Muslim states, many women prefer their lives to westernized women who are projected as corrupt, licentious, and anti-family. Hardacre (1993:141) enumerates the following reasons

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<sup>5</sup> Recent western pressure to attack Iraq and the prolonged Israel-Palestine conflict has further fuelled such divisive thinking especially among the youth of Islamic states.

that render religious dictates attractive to women: women, like men, support anti-colonial and pro-nationalist indigenous regimes; like men, women are fearful of change that weakens kinship ties and therefore social and economic dependencies; women want to be morally upright believers; women feel that their faith endows them with the will to keep their husbands and children on the path of God; women feel a sense of security within the household and outside, and finally fear modernization that may confuse and complicate their daily lives through disruption of “traditional” institutions. Given the present conditions of life in Afghanistan, religion may be perceived as the only force able to reinstate a sense of nationhood, kinship solidarities, and economic and political empowerment against what are seen as corrupting western ideologies and forces

As a result, women who accept “fundamentalism” as a way of life do not blame Islam for their impoverished and oppressed lives, but blame the corrupt government, patriarchal controls, and distorted interpretations of the Quran. At this point I do want to make a distinction between fundamentalism and Islam as a religious construct. To put it simply, the former is a political movement and the latter an individual and social belief system. Underlying their responses is a sense that the secular West wants to destroy Islam. Women in Afghanistan hate the Afghan fundamentalists, not Islam. As Kandiyotti (2001:53-54) concludes, “one has to understand the links between Islam and cultural nationalism; process of state consolidation and the modes of control established over local kin-based, religious and ethnic communities; and thirdly, international pressures that influence priorities and policies.” The intersection of these institutions creates both an oppressive patriarchal order that renders women dependent on men through kinship loyalties, and also sustains the cultural conditions in which women are willing participants.

The discussion on women's situation in Afghanistan has once again opened up the debate about the West versus the Middle East. Much of the recent debate about women in the Middle East and Islamic states has centered on the tension between a western model of citizenship and a model of citizenship based on women's continued submergence in family and community. These different models of citizenship are ascribed to distinct sociopolitical systems. In the West, the emphasis on liberalism, individualism, and secularism has led to citizenship to be defined in masculinist terms that marginalize women and any men who do not fit the dominant mode of masculinity. (Joseph and Slyomovics (2002:1). In Islamic states citizenship has been rooted in collective identity as proclaimed by the religious text. According to interpreters of Islam, individuals function through kinship groups where each individual within the group complements the other, thereby strengthening the unity of the group.

The family lies at the heart of Afghan society. Joseph and Slyomovics (2002:1) argue that, “religious institutions consider themselves the guardians of family integrity and hold families responsible for safeguarding religious sanctity.” When the kinship structure is legitimized through religion then patriarchy attains a religious status. In many economically underdeveloped societies women do not have access to education, employment or property. Although the Quran gives women limited rights to their father's and husband's property, religiously legitimated patriarchy circumscribes those rights. Thus, women's economic and political dependence on men is reinforced by this religiously based patriarchy. Perceived as the receptacles of family honor, women's “complimentary” and subordinate relationship to men in the family ensures the unity, cooperation and ultimate dignity of the family and the community. In this honor also lies her oppression.

Despite the fact that Joseph and Slyomovics (2002) understand how a patriarchal kinship system limits women's identity, they contend that, in opposition to western notions of citizenship, Middle Eastern systems provide more room for women to negotiate her role. I disagree with this projection because a) it uncritically limits women's roles to those defined by the family, and b) history has shown how repressive fundamentalist societies use the institution of family to oppress women. Numerous

researchers on women in the Islamic states justify the differential status of women in contradistinction to women in the West by claiming that women in the West have been commodified through advertising, marginalized and hegemonized by the Western state. Although commodification occurs in the West, the subordinate situation of women in Islamic states is not justified by contrast. In both societies (the West and the Middle East) the construction of womanhood through the definition of a heterosexual family and state (rooted in religion and/or so-called liberal secularism) provides the basis for women's oppression. Thus, in order to start a dialogue about the empowerment of women in any society one must understand the family, its impact on the actors within the family, and the effect of replicating familial hierarchies in society.

Yet, such a dichotomy between individual and group is problematic because in all cultures (East, West and Middle East) regardless of the model of citizenship, most women, unlike most men, are defined through their roles in the family and community. For all women although the family and the community may be locales of self-expression and even empowerment, they are also the same institutions in which women are oppressed. In all societies, the peculiar way that individual and family, and individual and state are linked actually creates the basis of any gender hierarchy. In other words, the degree to which an individual can be "free" from the family or social group is one of the features defining gender in any social setting. However, this does not imply that the only way women can gain equality or empower themselves is to alienate themselves from family and community. In Afghanistan, as in other traditional societies, women do not exist outside the family and community. Yet, family and kinship networks do not necessarily have to be destroyed in order to improve women's status through education, employment and access to resources. But they must be rearranged.

Defining one's relations in civil society as antithetical or irrelevant to citizenship perpetuates the myth that one's specific social connections are politically irrelevant. Feminists must realize that any theoretical analysis that proceeds from the polarization of civil society and the state precludes the possibility to develop strategies that can address issues of gender hierarchy globally. A critique of the presumed split between civil society and the state, or between religion or the community, remains crucial to the development of a future for women in Afghanistan.

As we saw in the review of the history of reform movements of the 1920s and 1970s, any legislation enhancing women's status by separating her from her family and community not only met with resistance from the tribal leaders and community but also led to the overthrow of the political regimes sponsoring such legislation. Women's role in the family and community is tied to the preservation of patriarchy through the religious submission of women to "ideal" gender roles. In Afghanistan the maintenance of subscribed gender roles enabled men in the family and the community to exercise power. Any threat to polygamy, removal of bride price, raising of marriage age, or divorce laws was seen as loosening control over women who would then challenge men's authority. Yet, this means that women's dependence on men for economic benefits, social recognition and familial satisfaction ties them to the family, and ascribes their citizenship through the community.

While caught in a web of intricate politics and spiraling poverty, women of Afghanistan have to redefine their community so that their economic and social contributions to society are recognized. Afghan women, as women everywhere are an integral part of their family, community and nation. It remains crucial to talk about women in Afghanistan as subjects with a history, conscience, a rationality for themselves; in other words, as women involved with the familial, social and economic process hand in hand with men. As Sima Wali, one of the few women who attended the Bonn talks on Afghanistan, states, "Men in Afghanistan are part of the solution not the problem." (2002:5) She takes umbrage with American feminists who insist on "liberating" women from their oppressive men. Therefore, for women in Afghanistan (and outside), family remains an institution where not only honor of women but also their

survival is based. It is in the interrelationships of men and women that societal sanctions and development is perceived. Given Afghanistan's current situation, till political stability and economic reconstruction occurs Islam as a state instrument cannot be downplayed either.

Given this historical background, one has to look at the future with caution. For women's status to improve in Afghanistan, the area that is the most vulnerable and needs immediate remedying is an emphasis on rural reconstruction. Rural Afghanistan is the backbone of Afghan society. In the immediate future, Afghan concerns are economic. Within the country thousands of women have been widowed, abandoned, divorced and rendered unmarried. These women survive in poverty as single women, or heads of their households. Education, skill training, and employment of these women could create a class of women who would then be economically empowered. This empowerment could translate into political power, which in turn could impact the need to change women's situation in the emerging Afghan society. Similarly, given the poverty of people in unfragmented households too, if women's education and employment is tied to men's skill acquisition and employment, her training can be perceived as enhancing the family income. Education and employment of women at the expense of men's will once again be perceived as a western ploy and resisted by men. Given the level of poverty and political instability, kinship ties get stronger and provide the economic and social comfort against the present situation. Contesting these institutions in a formulaic way to empower women is not a viable option. The solution lies in strengthening these bonds by insisting on women's economic participation. The expectation of such a strategy is that along with legislation, in the long run, educated women will be able to negotiate their roles in the family and society through their heightened economic participation. They will also be able to sustain a religious, cultural family structure on which both men and women depend.

Unlike earlier times, today in Afghanistan economic reconstruction and the maintenance of an Islamic identity are of primary concern to Afghan citizens. A call for democracy with Islam as the national religion (but separate from the state) is the language of currency. Situational politics demands a hybridized approach to development for the state. In this complex process, the first step will be to engage the tribal leaders in a dialogue and power sharing over the future of Afghanistan. Disarming warlords and reorganizing of local hierarchies will have to be risked. For economic and social change to occur in the countryside, local non-government organizations and development bodies should be supported in their use of community workers to educate the people bring about economic opportunities. Traditional modes of communication through kinship networks can still be mobilized to effect social change by creating networks of women. Social change is a product of diffusion, historical continuity and local modernity. Islam in Afghanistan is a reality that will inform people's lives, but a reinterpretation of the text to give some rights to women (as has occurred in Iran) can be attempted.

## **Conclusion**

Afghanistan has always had elite and middle-class women who asserted their rights and marched towards modernization. But despite these examples, the lot of most Afghan women in rural areas has been one of oppression through tribal customs and dictates. Those women who were publicly visible throughout the history of Afghanistan belonged to the royalty or elite and represented a very tiny population of the country. They do act as role models and provide a window into the possibility that social change can occur and illustrate the potential that women from different strata of society can

attempt change in their lives. Magnus and Naby (1998:13) claim that, “The internalization of democracy based on western individualism rather than traditional Afghan Islamic communalism, gender-blind social interaction, and the elevation of the individual above society, does not appear to be part of the emerging regional or Afghan worldview.” I agree, especially in light of the non-deliverance of rights and promised goods by western democracies to their own populations. In Afghanistan, democracy and an assertion of women’s rights can occur when the state is in an economically and politically stable condition, assisted by men and women inside and outside of Afghanistan. Democracy will occur as a process of social change that the whole nation needs to undergo. When this happens, a society built on democratic-oriented ideology will regard women as equal partners in the social, political, and economic reconstruction of Afghanistan.

Today Afghanistan is in such a desperate state that without external help and financial aid its future will be further jeopardized. It is against this political backdrop that one has to understand women’s situation in Afghanistan. Major dilemmas will always exist as to the most appropriate path to follow. There will always be debates about a so-called western model, urban elite model, Islamic model, and fundamentalist model. The basic (may I say fundamental) need is to ensure that women, like men, have access to resources for survival like education, jobs, mobility and public visibility. They too, like men, need to be ascribed status and respect for their decisions.

At the crossroads of Islamic fundamentalism and westernization, especially in terms of women’s status, Afghanistan provides the testing grounds for the future of hybridization. The current socio-political situation provides a basis for new insights into theoretical constructions of modernity, secularism and gender equality. The situation of women in the future of Afghanistan might challenge the dominant discourse on citizenship and feminism as defined by the West and provide to non-western nations and minorities in western nations an alternative that can bring social justice and economic equality to all. For women in Afghanistan participation in the economic reconstruction of the country is essential to realize their dreams of a cohesive and peaceful nation; becoming “victims” of Islamic burqas and Western “liberation” is the least of their concern.

In Afghanistan, as in other traditional societies, women do not exist outside the family and community. Yet, family and kinship networks do not necessarily have to be destroyed in order to improve women’s status through education, employment and access to resources. But they must be rearranged.

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