

Home Truths: Afghan women waiting for the U.S. to fulfill its promises
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Part of the justification for bombing Afghanistan “back to the Stone Age,” we were told, was to liberate Afghan women from the ultra-conservative Taliban regime. As these women cope with the grim aftermath of the bombing, our government continues to add insult to injury.

At a State Department Reception on International Women’s Day (March 8, 2004) Secretary of State Colin Powell was upbeat about the Bush Administration’s “wide-ranging efforts” to “help the women of Afghanistan recover their rights” and to “allow them to participate in the future of their country.” He commended Congress “for the speedy enactment of the Afghan Women and Children Relief Act,” signed last December, and spoke of “resources and technical expertise for the education and training of Afghan women and girls.”

These past few days, representatives of Afghan women’s organizations told Bay Area audiences a very different story. Yes, in Kabul and other centers Afghan girls are allowed to go to school again. And some women, many of them widows and single parents, have paid work. But most girls must help their families to survive from day to day. They need scholarships to make education a real possibility. In rural areas, where various “warlords” prevail and continue to dispense their own gun-law, women still wear the burkha for safety. Many are afraid to leave their homes. Staff members of non-profit organizations who travel outside the main cities to work on women’s projects also risk attack. Basic physical security does not exist.

People have no electricity. Many lack safe drinking water. Mothers agonize about how to provide enough for their families to eat, while thousands of children orphaned by war sleep in the streets and scavenge for food. After 25 years of constant conflict, people are exhausted and deeply traumatized. Their land has been reduced to rubble. There are no trees, no beauty, no ways to really rest and relax.

After the defeat of the Taliban, several nations, including the United States, pledged their support to help rebuild Afghanistan. France, Germany, Japan, and Scandinavian countries are doing their part. But the United States is dragging its feet. Afghan women fear that the U.S. government, like our media, has forgotten them, moved on to other business, and abandoned them to a desperate situation. Less than half the money promised by the United States has arrived. Of sixteen women’s centers that were committed, only two have been established. Reconstruction has barely started.

Women need clinics. They need medicines and transport to get to the clinics. Rural women need buyers for their hand-made jewelry, bead-trimmed scarves, and embroidered skirts and tablecloths. Many need to learn to read and write. Others want to learn new skills: to work with computers, or to become tailors, midwives, nurses, journalists, radio

and TV producers. Girls' education was severely disrupted for over a decade and then totally banned. A whole generation has lost out on schooling.

Women also want training so they can run for political office and contribute their wisdom and experience to policy-making and legislative work. They want to learn about family planning and environmental restoration. They want resources for grassroots organizations that benefit ordinary women. Too much aid money is spent on salaries, Landcruisers, and big offices in Kabul—benefiting professional relief workers from abroad rather than local communities. Women want liberation and they know it is still a long way off.

Hearing these women's stories gives us new information and new insights. They want us to share this news with everyone we know. They want people in the United States to hold our government accountable for its promises. Given the hardships they face, this is the very least we can do.

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