

Are Afghan women's voices expendable in the rush to 'stabilize' - and withdraw from Afghanistan?

Meeting in monochrome: women and the Afghanistan conference

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The picture said it all; an expanse of suits broken only by Hillary's blonde bob floating in their midst. The London Conference on Afghanistan gave birth to sweeping statements and soaring ambitions. But were they, in the end, as flat as those grey rows of suits?

For many of the attendees of the parliamentary event 'The Missing Link in Building Sustainable Peace in Afghanistan: Women's Priorities', the London Conference was over before it started. Frustration with Afghan women's almost total exclusion was palpable. As one guest complained, 'Government officials just don't care about women's rights, but are happy to use women when useful for their political agenda'. Tellingly, there were no government officials present at the event - apart from Anne Milton MP who had agreed to chair it and a lonely representative from DFID.

The political agenda in question now seems to be entirely consumed with extracting Western forces from the Afghan quagmire, and drove the only substantive shift born of the Afghanistan Conference: official endorsement of reconciliation process with factions of the Taliban (how far we've come from Blair's 2001 declaration that the Taliban were in 'total collapse'!). The potential consequences of this strategy for Afghan women have been lucidly described by Deniz Kandiyoti, and were vocally expressed by the Afghan women speaking at 'The Missing Link'.

Zarghona Rassa, who has been living in exile in the United Kingdom for over a decade, told me that the need to resort to negotiation with the Taliban indicates the latter's strength - and the slim likelihood that they will make concessions over women's rights. Whether the strategy will legitimately foster national reconciliation or will allow the Taliban to hold the government to ransom remains to be seen. Many of the event's speakers seemed pessimistic about the prospects of 'renting' the Taliban to secure their co-operation. Of course, opinion is varied and nuanced; Afghan member of parliament Shinkai Karokhail told me that many women were not necessarily opposed to engaging with the Taliban, but felt that their exclusion from the decision to do so boded ill.

Just one Afghan woman attended the London Conference proper; but it was Hillary Clinton emerged as the conference's 'champion' of women's rights, launching a Women's Action Plan focused on women's security and leadership. Arguably however, her leadership at the Conference reinforced some of the platitudes plaguing gender activism: that a women's rights agenda is best spearheaded by one (usually female) leader rather than be prioritized by a larger (usually male) group of politicians, that the input of local Afghan women is of scant importance. In short, that gender issues are marginal and lack immediacy.

Indeed, gender issues played a minor - almost invisible - role in the proceedings of the Afghanistan

Conference. They were entirely absent from Brown and Karzai's addresses. The Conference's communiqué paused but once to reference women's rights - by commending the Afghan government's commitment to the National Action Plan for Women of Afghanistan and the Elimination of Violence Against Women Law.

The obvious shortcoming here is that these instruments, however well-intentioned, may have slight impact in a society where many women have little access to the judicial system.

There are other, broader, shortcomings. Attendant leaders were eager to stress the need to transfer responsibility for Afghan governance and security to its national government - and quick to laud Afghanistan's progress toward transparent and democratic rule. The controversies surrounding Karzai's re-election seem to have melted from the public agenda with alarming speed. Yet without genuine legitimacy, shouldn't the ability of Karzai's capacity to rule effectively, democratically, and inclusively be a real concern for Western governments claiming to keep 'democracy' afloat in Afghanistan?

Perhaps the most pressing issue is how 'democracy' being defined here. Is it a polity where female participation is non-negotiable? Or are Afghan women's voices expendable in the rush to 'stabilize' - and withdraw from Afghanistan? These questions could have inspired colourful debate at the London Conference, as they did at 'The Missing Link'. For now, however, the Afghanistan agenda seems set in monochrome.

by Sara Mojtehedzadeh

P.S.

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