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Reality Gap in Afghanistan

Despite rosy reports, women's rights remain wishful thinking.

By *Belquis Ahmadi*

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For 10 days I sat inside a tent in Kabul as one of 200 women delegates participating in the loya jirga to determine Afghanistan's future government. Given my experience, the widespread willingness to declare that assembly an unmitigated success is a mystery to me and, I would hope, to all those who put reality before rhetoric when it comes to women's rights.

Afghan women emerged from the loya jirga facing not only the discrimination and harassment that are a part of Afghan life but a real danger to their physical security. Those who pose these threats to Afghan women are no longer international pariahs (the Taliban) but participants in the heralded new government of Afghanistan.

When I first entered the loya jirga, I was inspired by the outspokenness of the Afghan men and women in attendance. Many women found the courage to deliver speeches before the mostly male crowd, campaign for candidates and even make efforts to confront the warlords who were there. One Afghan woman even pursued a largely symbolic run for the presidency.

But such apparent signs of progress were eclipsed by a growing sense of futility in the face of threats, bribes and intimidation by warlords and their supporters.

Following a letter in a prominent local newspaper labeling her the "Afghan Salman Rushdie" and public threats by speakers at the loya jirga, Sima Simar, former minister of women's affairs, has been subjected to threats and harassment. The risks she faces cannot be overstated in a society in which little stands in the way of extremists who have both the desire and ability to act on such threats and where the deputy justice of the Supreme Court has left open the possibility of charging Samar with blasphemy, a crime punishable by death.

Masooda Jalal, the woman who challenged Hamid Karzai for the presidency, received threats throughout the loya jirga and continues to be the target of systematic intimidation. Afghan women less visible than these two women also fear retribution for participating in the loya jirga and for speaking out for women's rights.

Judging by this intimidation campaign, one might think Afghan women are gaining in power and threaten to undermine Afghanistan's male-dominated society. Instead, take a look at the new Afghan government.

Where once a woman held the position of vice chair, now four of five vice chair positions are filled by warlords. Women have managed to hold on to the two posts

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assigned during the interim administration -- health and women's affairs -- but with little hope that women will be allowed to move beyond those traditional roles in the new government.

Most Afghan women live with daily reminders of their lack of status in Afghan society. Despite rosy news reports, some forms of discrimination have even worsened for women since the fall of the Taliban.

For example, while women were forced to take separate buses from men during the Taliban years, they at least had seats on those buses. Today they must sit in designated seats at the back of the bus or stand, also in the back, when those few seats are filled. And a walk down the street in Kabul still exposes them to the certainty of being groped and verbally harassed by men.

Threats to prominent and not-so-prominent Afghan women are a test of whether the support of the Bush administration and the international community for Afghan women's rights was merely a gesture or represented a genuine commitment never to let the abuses of the Taliban be repeated. Those who are truly dedicated to the cause of Afghan women must show their support now.

In particular, Karzai publicly must denounce threats being made against Afghan women leaders and voice his support for prominent women such as Samar. And the Afghan government must include women in all levels of government, both national and local in more than token positions and traditional roles.

The international community must be ready to back up its flowery statements on women's rights by working to protect those who believed in the promise of a new Afghanistan that would respect women's rights. Now that the loya jirga has ended, the real show begins.

The writer is Afghanistan program coordinator for the International Human Rights Law Group. She was assisted in the preparation of this article by Mary Lou Hartman of that organization.

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