

that intervened to help push the Soviet Union out of Afghanistan, showed no interest in that country's future. Tribal factionalism and civil strife further ruined the country. The result was massive reversals for women and their total exclusion from politics, from public life, from employment — making them invisible non-persons. The Taliban became internationally reviled for its atrocious treatment of women. All the earlier gains from the time of King Amanullah onward were erased and the Afghan intelligentsia and professionals fled into exile.

Hannah Papanek noted in 1989 that different regimes (in Afghanistan and Iran) have “used their specific stand on the ‘woman question’ as a way of signalling their political agenda.” Covering and uncovering women signified the political, economic and cultural projects of these regimes. Today again the issue has come to the fore. Iranian-born Valentine Moghadam, Professor of Sociology, has reminded us that broad-based and popular social movements in which women participate — as in Iran — do not mean an enhancement of women's status, and conversely a minority government or imposed government may emancipate women — as occurred in Afghanistan. She argues that events in Iran and Afghanistan in the 1980s show that social upheavals are “not only

about contention over political power and economic change (among men)” but are also about “definitions of culture and especially male-female relations.” In an interesting comparison of Iran and Afghanistan, Moghadam writes:

In Iran, the Islamic authorities saw a deep moral and cultural crisis exemplified in “the naked woman.” To solve the problem, woman had to be covered and domesticated. By contrast in Afghanistan, the secluded veiled woman was seen by the revolutionaries as exemplifying the country's backwardness; consequently women had to be educated and uncovered.

We read that the Afghan King's delegation to Bonn includes two women. This is a hopeful sign. Recently The UN Special Envoy on Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, met with Afghan women exiles in Pakistan who stressed the importance of women's participation in civil society and in the on-going negotiations. We hope that Brahimi will not let Afghan men persuade him that “national reconciliation” takes priority over women's rights. There can be no justice in Afghanistan unless women are free. ■

Courtesy *Cat's Eye*, 28, Nov. 2001.

## RECLAIMING 23 LOST YEARS: TO SECURE AFGHANISTAN'S FUTURE, BRING BACK ITS WOMEN

Pamela Philipose

It's difficult to know where to begin when it comes to chronicling the immediate past of Afghanistan's women, just as it is difficult to know where to stop when it comes to fathoming the future. Only one thing can be said with certainty— if the country has to reclaim itself, its women will have to reclaim the present. Of course, all over the world a great deal of lip service is suddenly being paid to the cause, what with two famous wives— Laura Bush and Cherie Blair—recently participating in a worldwide campaign to focus on Taliban's brutality to women. But the evils of the Taliban regime are well known, what is not so familiar is the record of the Northern Alliance, which is not that much better. Its tolerance of music and barbers must not hide the fact that it comprises elements who would argue, like the Taliban do, that a woman's face is the source of all corruption. Afghan social activist, Fahima Vorgetts, put it this way, “Now people are listening to what we say about the Taliban but they must listen to what we say about the Northern Alliance to avoid future tragedy. We must not forget that the Northern Alliance committed so many atrocities during their rule between 1992 and 1996.”

The future then is a slippery slope, made more difficult by the legacy of the last two decades, when every major player—including the UN and the new champions of Afghan women, the US—thought nothing of bartering away women's rights on the altar of expediency.

While the UN kept compromising with the Taliban, until women were literally erased from the mindscape, the US's role was a particularly cynical one. At one point, even as Hillary Clinton was loudly berating the Taliban for their cruelty towards women, her husband was keeping his fingers crossed that the \$4.5 billion pipeline network that oil transnational Unocal wanted to build to carry Caspian Sea oil across Afghanistan would come through with the blessings of the Taliban. Only women's groups in the US had the courage to speak out against this.

As for Islamic nations, their record was not much better. Today most of them don't hesitate to point out that the Taliban's ways were unIslamic. Yet, as Ahmed Rashid points out in his book *Taliban: Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia*, most of them, with the partial exception of Iran, never bothered to issue a single statement on the need for women's education or human rights in Afghanistan. Nor did they ever question the Taliban's interpretation of the Sharia. In hindsight, the treatment meted out to Afghan women over the last two decades and more could figure as one of the great crimes against humanity of our times. There were atrocities committed when the Soviets ruled. Survivors of the December 1984 massacres in Chardara district of Kunduz spoke of Soviet soldiers disembowelling pregnant women with bayonets. Amnesty International has recorded eyewitness

accounts of the forces of General Dostum raping women and of scores of women being abducted and detained by various Mujahideen groups. In this scenario, women were used both as weapons to settle scores and as implements to regulate social behaviour. In 1994, Islamic youth groups affiliated to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's party, the Hezb-en Islami, warned women not to go to public places and to wear Islamic clothing. What did change once the Taliban established their dominance was the institutionalisation of this highly skewed order. With the fall of Kabul to the Taliban in 1996, a decree was issued by the religious police, which rendered the city the world's biggest prison for women. It began like this: "Women! You should not step outside your residence..." Today, the details of that ugly era are well-known. How women were banned by the Department of the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice from wearing high heels, making a noise with their shoes while walking or wearing make-up. How 4,000 women students of Kabul University melted away never to return to an education. How some 50,000 war widows were reduced to begging since they could no longer earn. How thousands of young zealots walked around with kalashnikovs and whips terrorising women who had ventured out. 'Crimes' were met with exemplary punishment. A woman could have the top of her thumb removed for wearing nail polish, be flogged for defiance or stoned to death for adultery. The fact that such punishment was deliberately made public, with the Taliban rounding up people and forcing them to watch, indicated how central the instilling of public fear and the suppression of women were in keeping them in power.

But the consequences this had for ordinary Afghans will probably never be recorded in their entirety. Take something as innocuous as wearing a *burqa*. Being an expensive garment, the equivalent of five months' salary for some, few could afford it. Consequently, whole neighbourhoods had to share one garment, resulting in women having to wait for weeks before even venturing out of their

homes. In 1998, a report brought out by the Boston-based Physicians for Human Rights pointed out that 97 per cent of the Afghan women they could contact showed symptoms of major depression. Doctors have reported a high incidence of oesophageal burns, as women swallowed battery acid or household cleaners in suicide bids.

Data from this era is, of course, practically non-existent. Up to 1996, Afghanistan figured in UNDP human development reports. It had a Human Development Index of 169, life expectancy of 43.7, adult literacy of 29.8. Only 12 per cent of its population had access to safe drinking water and its maternal mortality rate—1,700 for 100,000 live births—was the second highest in the world. Interestingly, the depredations of war came out clearly in the figures of the daily caloric intake of the people. In 1965, the figure stood at 73. By 1992, it had come down to 49. By 1997, Afghanistan had fallen off the data map and we hear no more about the welfare of its women and children. Things could only have gotten worse since then.

This was the past. If the future has to be any different, the tattered fabric of Afghanistan's civil society will have to be stitched together and only women can do this. Their strength, resources and courage are without doubt. Take, for instance, an organisation like the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), founded by Meena Keshwar Kamal, a health worker who was assassinated, allegedly by the Mujaheddin, for her stance against fundamentalism. RAWA worked secretly right through those years of repression helping women, educating children, and documenting the tyranny of the rulers. Groups like this must today be given a voice in the rebuilding of the country. Afghanistan's women know, as RAWA put it in a recent statement, more than anyone else, that they can never achieve their rights through "the 'kindness' of fundamentalists".

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## Women and the Nation's Narrative

Gender and Nationalism in Twentieth Century Sri Lanka

Neloufer de Mel

This book explores the development of nationalism in Sri Lanka during the past century, particularly within the dominant Sinhala Buddhist and militant Tamil movements. Tracing the ways women from diverse backgrounds have engaged with nationalism, Neloufer de Mel argues that gender is crucial to an understanding of nationalism and vice versa.