



Jacqueline Mia Foster/Choices

Afghanistan women lack the rights assured now in many other countries.

afghanistan

by Mae Buenaventura

On September 27, 1996, the world watched as the Muslim fundamentalist organization Taliban wrested control from other groups in war-torn Afghanistan, subsequently capturing Kabul. At first, governments including Pakistan and the U.S., which later denied supporting the Taliban, welcomed this development. Oil companies also saw the Taliban coup as a positive development. But for the people of Kabul, it marked the beginning of a reign of terror that continues to intensify to this day.

The Taliban currently rules about two-thirds of Afghanistan and have imposed a strict social and legal order in accordance with their fundamentalist interpretation of Islamic Law (*Shari'a*). This has left in its wake a trail of torture and atrocities, spe-



Anxiety about the Taliban's rule of terror grips women in Afghanistan.

cially among women, that rebut the Taliban's claim of having brought security to Afghanistan.

One terrorized Afghan health workers protested: "Security? What security? Taliban guards looted my house...My wife does not dare go out of the house; my sister-in-law has been beaten in the street; my teenage daughters cry all the time; I am afraid that I shall be punished for an absurd reason such as not having a long beard. Is this security?"

As the stranglehold of religious fundamentalism tightens even more, Afghanistan finds itself in steadily worsening conditions since the Soviet occupation.

WOMEN AND HEALTH CARE

Women face severe restrictions on their freedom of movement and access to health care, education and employment. Afghan refugees in Pakistan recounted how a mother living in Furah tried to take her toddler to the doctor for severe diarrhea. A Taliban guard noticed her in the street which caused her to panic and flee. Several rounds were fired at her by the guard from his Kalashnikov but she was able to escape unharmed and bring her child in for treatment. Another woman was not as lucky and was forced to deliver her baby in a Kabul street while her husband was being beaten for trying to bring her to the hospital.

While the Taliban have banned women from most occupations, some female doctors and nurses have been allowed to work in public hospitals and clinics only because the *Shari'a* requires patients to be attended by physicians of the same sex.

Medical practitioners under these conditions are at the mercy of the Taliban. Many female doctors and nurses are beaten or forced to witness beatings of female colleagues by Taliban guards for such perceived infringement as failure to wear the *burqas*, a full-length mantle. Armed men are a constant presence in hospitals and can intervene at will through the authority of the Department of Enforcement of Morals.

Male doctors are viewed with suspicion and hostility. The Taliban are known to have humiliated doctors in public, routinely questioning them on their "moral conduct" in hospitals. Such treatment has made it difficult for them to practice with any authority.

Female patients also suffer the twisted logic of Taliban laws. For instance in one hospital, the guards ordered all female patients home because they felt the women's modesty could not be safeguarded in an overcrowded ward.

DETERIORATING HEALTH CARE

In a country where so many are denied access to medical care and health workers themselves are forced to secure their own persons and families, the need for adequate health care services has never been so great. Public utility systems have also almost completely collapsed after years of conflict and have actually be-

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come breeding grounds for infectious diseases.

Doctors routinely treat people who have been maimed by landmines, injured in the fighting between warring religious factions, or shot for refusing to obey Taliban guards. Health professionals have become all too familiar with torture victims of the Taliban with their broken bones, bruises, fractured skulls, serious burns from having been torched after being doused with fuel...

Few doctors are prepared to talk openly about such atrocities because they fear violent reprisal. They are painfully aware that some of their colleagues have decided to collaborate with the Taliban or actively promote their restrictions on the provisions of health care to all.

RAWA

At the forefront of the struggle for women's rights is the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), a left-of-center group that has been acting through non-violent means to provide education and health facilities to women.

Already, it has paid dearly for its militancy. In February 1987, health worker and founding member Meena Keshwar Kamal was found shot dead with two other family members in her home in Qetta. Pakistani dailies pointed to the Afghan secret police as the perpetrators but RAWA believed it was the handiwork of fundamentalists from whom Kamal had repeatedly received death threats in the past.

And the intimidation continues. Writing to Amnesty International, RAWA wrote: "We

are being threatened...We are not allowed to provide the much needed education for Afghan women...There are Islamic groups affiliated to Gulbuddin Hekmatyar's party (*Hezb-e Islami*). He has warned women not to go to public places and wear Islamic clothing...There are clinics in Islamabad, for instance, providing free medical treatment of women. The group stops women from going there, objecting to Afghan women being treated by a male doctor. We cannot distribute our publications and educational cassettes. [Shopkeepers] have been threatened that if they sell our publications, they will be killed...."

In over a decade of its work in Afghanistan, RAWA confirms the long-standing oppression of Afghan women—by the *Jehadi* fundamentalist cliques in recent history, and today, by the Taliban, the likes of which they have seen no precedence in the modern history of the country.

"All of them have the Kalashnikov in one hand and the Quran in the other, to kill, intimidate, detain and mutilate...All are violently misusing Islam, interpreting the Quran according to their own personal whims and political interests....," states RAWA.

Muslim fundamentalists of whatever brand have been known to stone men and women to death, cut off people's limbs, stage public executions and even book burnings in this day and age. Though fierce contenders for control over Afghanistan, they have proven to be alike in their aversion to science and culture. Invariably, schools are "doors to hell," radio is "the

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Significantly, former *jehadi* rulers are trying to present an image of being the opposite of the Taliban. In truth, RAWA claims, they had their own women speaking out with fundamentalist fervor. The only major difference is that the Taliban make no attempts to mask their acts of terror, particularly their fanatic oppression of women.

RAWA’S STANDPOINTS

In the continuing struggle of the Afghan women for their rights, there will probably be more Meena Kamals but as RAWA recognizes: “...Our women will never be able to achieve their rights through the ‘kindness’ of the fundamentalists. To attain meaningful emancipation, our women must continue their hard, long struggle against fanaticism and carry it to the end.” The following are among RAWA’s views of the Afghanistan situation:

On the UN Role: The United Nations has not been able to address the problem effectively. If the UN can send a large peace-keeping force in Cambodia and Bosnia, it should have more reason to do the same in Afghanistan where fundamentalist groups in power are being supported by foreign governments.

On Zahir Shah: RAWA is not a monarchist organization, nor does it support such form of government. However, since a majority of the Afghan people support the Zahir Shah, RAWA has opted to support the former king against all the other self-proclaimed *jehadi*

leaders.

On the settlement of the Afghan crisis: Believing that the presence of armed fundamentalist parties is the root cause of the crisis in Afghanistan, we advocate the disarming of all these bands by a disinterested peace-keeping force. The same body can supervise the convening of the *Loya Jirga* (Grand Assembly), and the formation of a democratic government which can set the holding of general elections within a year’s time.

On our concept of good government: The government we want is simply one that is based on democratic values, ensuring freedom of thought, religion and expression and women’s rights. Since the fundamentalists clearly use Islam to justify their violent governance, RAWA underscores the necessity of a secular government adhering to the separation of religion and the political process in Afghanistan.

On Islamic hejab: We view the harsh imposition of the *hejab* as part of the fundamentalists’ moves to suppress the Afghan women and deprive them of their basic rights. Violently forcing men to grow beards or women to wear *hejab* removes attention from the more basic issue of the fundamentalists’ inability to understand and uplift economic conditions. ♪

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