

“Saving” Afghan Women

By Sonali Kolhatkar

As I got ready to be interviewed by Helen Caldicott, the famous Helen Caldicott, activist and feminist, I remarked to my fellow interviewee how excited I was to be speaking with one of my heroes. I had heard Helen on the radio and read articles about her and her brave campaigns to fight nuclear weapons and environmental degradation.

Helen began by asking me about my work with the Afghan Women’s Mission and on Afghan women’s rights. Despite my nervousness, I answered calmly, but Helen wouldn’t let me finish my sentences. She kept asking me to talk about why Afghan men treated women in the way they did. I tried to talk about the U.S. empowerment of misogynist fundamentalists in Afghanistan and how U.S. support had raised a generation of men who abused the power of their guns on women. But she angled for another answer and kept pushing me to try to read her mind and tell her what she wanted to hear. Thrown off balance by her aggressive questioning, I finally gave up and she proceeded to tell me all about female genital mutilation (FGM) which, the Feminist Majority Foundation had apparently told her, took place among Afghan women. Aghast at this misinformation, for in my years of carefully studying the issue of Afghan women’s rights, I had never come across instances of FGM, I mumbled that it was not something I was aware of. The interview ended as I took the headphones off and walked out, angry and frustrated with

Helen ranting about the barbarity that women’s vaginas were being sewn up and that Afghan men did not want women to be able to have orgasms.

I raced to my computer to do some research. Could I have been wrong? Was FGM really prevalent among Afghan women? I had known of it happening to women in some African countries, but surely I would have heard of it if it was prevalent in a country geographically and culturally close to my home country of India, a country I had studied closely?

Well, it turns out Ms. Caldicott was wrong. FGM is not practiced in Afghanistan. I learned two lessons from my experience: (1) No pedestal is well deserved, greatness is an overrated perception; and, (2) Feminists like Helen Caldicott and the Feminist Majority approach the women of the Global South with short-sighted preconceptions of feminism. Helen Caldicott was more interested in exploring the desire of Afghan men to treat women like dirt than in examining those forces (most often, western-influenced, male-

dominated governments) that have fostered religious extremism at the expense of women’s rights.

It is easy to condemn the “barbaric” men of Afghanistan and pity the helpless women of Afghanistan. It is this very logic that drives the Feminist Majority’s “Gender Apartheid” campaign for Afghan women. Far more interested in portraying Afghan women as mute creatures covered from head to toe, the Feminist Majority promotes itself and its campaign by selling small squares of mesh cloth, similar to the mesh through which Afghan women wearing the traditional *burqa* can look outside. The postcard on which the swatch of mesh is sold says, “Wear a symbol of remembrance for Afghan women,” as if they are already extinct. An alternative could have been “Celebrate the Resistance of Afghan Women” with a pin of a hand folded into a fist—to acknowledge the very real struggle that Afghan women wage every day, particularly the women of the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), who are at the forefront of that struggle. Interestingly enough, 50 percent of all proceeds go toward helping Feminist Majority in promoting their campaign on “Gender Apartheid” in Afghanistan.

In almost every portrayal of Afghan women in the Western media, mainstream or alternative, shapeless blue clad forms of Afghan women covered with the *burqa* dominate (Am-

nesty International's poster, the cover of Cheryl Bernard's new book on RAWA, etc.). We all know and understand the reactions that the image of the *burqa* brings, particularly to Western women and feminists—that mixture of horror with fear and ugly fascination, like knowing the site of a bloody car wreck will make you want to retch but you still look anyway. Whose purpose does this serve? How “effective” would the Feminist Majority's campaign be if they made it known that Afghan women were actively fighting back and simply needed money and moral support, not instructions?

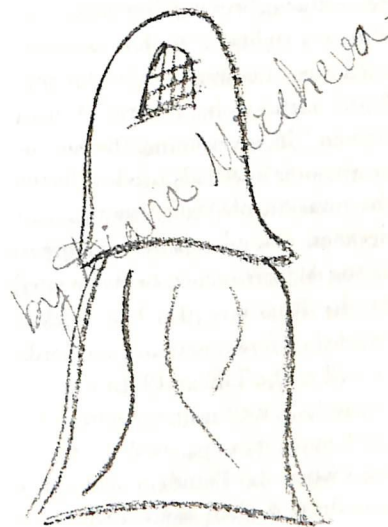
It is for this reason, I have gathered, that the Feminist Majority Foundation is not interested in working with RAWA, which is too independent and politicised. What good is it to flaunt images of Afghan women marching militantly with fists in the air, carrying banners about freedom, democracy and secular government? Those women would not need saving as much as the *burqa*-clad women seem to. We might just realise that groups such as the Feminist Majority are not necessary to tell Afghan women how to help themselves from their oppression. We might just gather that Afghan women are perfectly capable of helping themselves, if only our governments would stop arming and empowering the violent sections of their society. After all, it was the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) that armed and trained the likes of Gullbuddin Hekmatyar in the 1970s, even back then famous for mutilating women with acid for failing to cover themselves up. Hekmatyar

was known by the CIA for being a “fascist.” Where is the CIA's criticism of barbarity in Helen Caldicott's remarks on Afghan women?

It is not just white women feminists in the U.S. who seek to control the message of women's movements in the Global South. This March, I excitedly obtained the endorsement of the board of the Afghan Women's Mission for the Global Women's Strike, which happens each year on International Women's Day. This was a three-year old movement spanning several countries, where women walked out of their homes and jobs to demand equal pay and compensation for child rearing, among other things. This year's theme was “Invest in Caring, Not Killing” and, appropriately, the strike was dedicated to condemning the U.S. War in Afghanistan. The local organiser, Margaret Prescod, was initially pleased that the Afghan Women's Mission was signing on. However, Prescod and the main organisers of the strike, who resided in England, objected to the language of our flyer only two days before the planned march in downtown Los Angeles. The main message on the front of the flyer was a condemnation of fundamentalism and an indictment of the U.S. support for it, embedded in a quote by a RAWA member. It included the following sentence: “We welcome the combat against terrorism. In fact, this combat should have started years ago in terms of preventing incidents like September 11. But this combat against terrorism cannot be won by bombing this or that country. It should be a campaign to stop any country that

sells arms or supports financially the fundamentalists' movements or fundamentalist regimes.”

Undoubtedly the bombing of Afghanistan was, and remains, a large concern to the Afghan Women's Mission and RAWA. Both have released



public statements condemning the bombing. But fundamentalism and the very real terrorism of the Taliban and Northern Alliance is a large part of the ongoing problem that Afghan women live with every day, that kills them every day, before and after the bombing. Perturbed that our anti-war message was not clear enough, the organisers of the strike threatened to not allow the Afghan Women's Mission endorsement. This coalition of women condemning the bombing and demanding equal pay and compensation for child rearing could not appreciate that some women on the other side of the world had slightly different problems. Afghan Women's Mission ultimately participated in the march and our flyer was left largely intact.

RAWA has also faced some consternation from the progressive left. Upset at RAWA's criticism of the Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, some prominent groups on the left have silently ignored RAWA's contribution, and have instead focused on the "good work" of the Soviet regime in bringing "progress" and women's rights to Afghan women. Uncanny, the similarity to George Bush's claim to have "saved Afghan women." If one examines the various propaganda methods used to justify the invasion of Afghanistan in past decades, a similar pattern emerges: saving Afghan women has been cited by the Russians, the U.S.-backed *mujahideen* fundamentalist war lords, as well as the Taliban (!). In fact, the entire U.S. war against Afghans has been made more palatable to Americans when the President said that it was those Afghan women we would be saving by bombing. First Lady Laura Bush developed a sudden interest in Afghan women's rights and began spouting Feminist Majority-like rhetoric. George Bush claimed that we had saved Afghan women from oppression as he showed off his poster child, Sima Samar, head of the Human Rights Commission of Afghanistan. And for its leaflets to justify the bombing that were scattered over Afghanistan, the U.S. State Department used images from RAWA's Website, without its permission.

Of course, it's not just women in the U.S. that have exploited or misunderstood RAWA's message. At a recent anti-war forum, I spoke alongside well-known activist and writer Michael Parenti, who claimed that the

Soviet Union was invited into Afghanistan in 1979, that it did not really invade the country. After I contradicted him in my speech, citing that the vast majority of the Afghan population were fairly united against foreign domination and the imperialist motives of the Soviet Union, Michael angrily asked me after the talk why RAWA does not concede to some of the good that the Russians did in Afghanistan. Wow. Do we ever dwell on the good that the U.S. may have done in Vietnam? How could he ask this of a group whose leader was brutally assassinated by a Russian KGB operative, in collaboration with an Afghan *mujahideen*, for being outspoken against the occupation and fighting for women's rights?

Today, as a U.S.-sponsored government in Afghanistan has emerged from the Loya J irga (grand assembly) process, the very same fundamentalist warlords supported by the U.S. through the 1980s have been legitimized and empowered, behind the figurehead of Hamid Karzai, a puppet of George Bush. Afghan women's rights were used and upheld as the reason for "liberating" the Afghan people—they have once more been discarded in favor of powerful interests of the U.S. government and Afghan patriarchy. While Oprah Winfrey provides touching vignettes of Afghan women finally able to don high heels and lace dresses, politically Afghan women have been marginalised and promised more *Sharia* law. Will feminists in the West once more look away now that the Taliban has been replaced by U.S.-friendly fundamentalists? Afghan women such as the

women of RAWA will remain tirelessly struggling, in the face of this continued fundamentalism.

From Helen Caldicott to Michael Parenti, isn't it imperative and obvious that when we speak of Afghan women and their rights, we must listen carefully to what they themselves have to say about it? As the admirable struggles of women of colour, particularly in the Global South, come to the knowledge of the West, we must remind ourselves of the sovereignty of their views and hopes, over our perceptions of what they should say and do, how they should dress, and whether or not their oppression stems from not being able to have an orgasm. ♀

Sonali Kolhatkar is Vice-President of the Afghan Women's Mission. She has spoken out about Afghan women's rights at college campuses and community forums all over America. Her latest paper, "The Impact of U.S. Intervention on Afghan Women's Rights," appears in Berkeley Women's Law Journal. Sonali is also the host and co-producer of a daily two-hour morning show on politics and public affairs at KPFK Radio in Los Angeles. She has a Master of Science in Astrophysics from the University of Hawaii.

Source: Z Magazine online or Znet, at <http://www.zmag.org>, 9 May 2002.

Editor's Note: Women in Action (WIA) tried to reach Feminist Majority to hear their side of the story. Series of E-mail messages were sent but no reply came in until the printing of this issue. WIA would still welcome a paper submission from Feminist Majority related to the above article for its next issue.