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Afghanistan has been in a constant state of chaos for twenty years. The Soviets invaded in 1979 and installed a puppet regime. After they withdrew their troops in 1989, rival mujahideen (tribal) groups began to fight for the capital. By the time the Taliban came into the picture around 1994, the country had been devastated by war. Many Afghans had fled to neighboring countries like Pakistan. An estimated 1 million lives had been lost. Now, bad conditions still persist. Afghanistan has one of the world’s worst literacy rates; only three percent of women and less than twenty percent of men can read and write (Rashid, 107). A quarter of all children die before their fifth birthday. Life expectancy is only 43-44 years (107). Simply, life is hard, especially for women. Women have been caught in the middle of powerful governments fighting for control. The issue of their emancipation is not religious or cultural. It is political. To understand the struggle of women, we must consider their socioeconomic history, the qualities of the Taliban, and the reactions of outside groups to the fate of Afghan women. The leaders of Afghan government have consistently worked to reform women’s rights. For the past century, emancipation for women has been an essential part of the image of the nation. Amir Habibullah, who ruled from 1901 to 1919, stressed that women should have a role in society beyond motherhood (Dupree, 307). Mahmud Beg Tarzi (1865-1933), a leading reformer of the time argued for education of women. He believed that intellectual women in the home would lead to a stronger sense of family and nation. He constantly spoke of the egalitarian Islam, one that does not deny women the right to knowledge (Dupree, 306-307). King Amanullah (1919-1929), the son of Habibullah, continued to emphasize marriage rights and advocated monogamy, removal of the veil, end of seclusion, and education. At this time powerful women began to speak out about what they desired. Amanullah’s queen, Suraya, and her sister Siraj ul-Banat both were publicly vocal about equality. In 1923, Ul-Banat said: Some people are laughing at us, saying that women know only how to eat and drink...but knowledge is not man’s monopoly. Women also deserve to be knowledgeable. We must on the one hand bring up children and, on the other hand, help men in their work. We must read about famous women in this world, to know that women can achieve exactly what men can achieve. (307) Both sisters were strongly influenced by the moderate men around them. They wished to contribute to their society. They were passionate and forceful as they urged women to "attempt to acquire as much knowledge as possible in order that we may render our services to society in the manner of the women of early Islam" (Dupree, 308). Their genuine intentions however, were not completely mirrored by the government. Suraya and Siraj were women fighting for the freedom of others like them. The government consisted of powerful men fighting to keep a strong appearance. By the 1970’s, many women worked outside the home. Most were upper or middle class urbanites. In Kabul, 42% were educated and 41% were employed. Women were secretaries, diplomats, hairdressers, and factory workers. In the rural provinces, however, most of the female population did not know about the change in women’s roles. By the end of the decade, women were cynical about the emancipation movement. Muhammad Daoud made many promises, when he established the Republic of Afghanistan on July 17, 1983 (Dupree, 310). Most of these were seen as a "scam" (311). Women saw the emancipation movement as something that consisted of many words, but little execution. Under the Communists in the 1980’s women continued to work in cities. Their role extended to the fields of law and medicine. However, this time was also marked by extreme chaos and oppression. Women felt "disillusioned by the empty rhetoric, shocked and betrayed by the Soviet invasion" (Dupree, 332). In June 1980, the women’s page of the Kabul
New Times remarked: There is nothing more ridiculous than granting privileges on paper without pushing them through practically... There must be an effective law-enforcing apparatus to put into effect each right granted... so that every man who does not believe in women's attitudes may be convinced that he is wrong. In order to raise the status of women we must first raise the standards of their men. (332) By this point women were completely frustrated with empty promises and unstable governments who continued to use women's rights as a platform for their own purposes. Sadly, the situation only grew worse. Soviet troops left in 1989, leave Afghanistan in the hands of rival mujahideen (tribes). By 1994, these groups had begun to lose interest. The chaos of the past two decades now escalated as an Islamic fundamentalist faction rose to power. The Taliban captured Kabul, the capital, in 1996. Their "goals" were to restore peace, disarm the population, and defend the integrity of the Islamic character of Afghanistan. A "talib" is an Islamic student. Most of the Taliban's forces are orphans and refugees from the war, who were schooled in madrassas, Islamic schools, in Pakistan. These boys, soon men, had been raised in a completely male society where control over women is seen as a powerful symbol of manhood. They are "children of the jihad" and they see themselves as purifiers of the Islamic way of life that has been corrupted. Ahmed Rashid writes: In the madrassa milieu, control over women and their virtual exclusion was a powerful symbol of manhood and a reaffirmation of the students' commitment to jihad. Denying a role for women gave the Taliban a kind of false legitimacy amongst these elements. Simi Wali, the head of an Afghan NGO: 'This conflict against women is rooted in the political beliefs and ideologies, not in Islam or the cultural norms. The Taliban are a new generation of Muslim males who are products of a war culture, who have spent much of their adult lives in complete segregation from their communities. In Afghan society, women have traditionally been used as instruments to regulate social behavior, and as such are powerful symbols in Afghan culture. (Rashid, 111) This ideology was incorporated in Taliban psyche to justify their uncompromising domination. Violations against Taliban edicts are often enforced on the spot by the police force, also known as the Department of Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. Workers carry whips and long sticks as they patrol the streets. They are all employees of Maulvi Qalamuddin, the head of the department. Qalamuddin's orders are broadcast on Radio Shariat, the Taliban-controlled station. The Taliban's punishments are largely derived from a social code known as the Pashtunwali, the law of the Pashtun. The line between this set of laws and the Shari'a is constantly blurred. This ideology creates a greater ethnic divide in Afghanistan because non-Pashtuns wonder why Pashtun code is being applied to the whole country. This doesn't concern the Taliban or Mullah Omar, their mysterious, reclusive, one-eyed leader. The Pashtunwali is part of their background: The Taliban leaders were all from the poorest, most conservative, and least literate southern Pashtun provinces of Afghanistan. In Mullah Omar's village women had always gone around fully veiled and no girls had ever gone to school because there were none. Omar and his colleagues transposed their own milieu, their own experience, or lack of it, with women, to the entire country and justified their policies through the Koran. For a time, some aid agencies claimed that this was the Afghan cultural tradition, which had to be respected. But in a country so diverse in its ethnicity and levels of development, there was no universal standard of tradition or culture for women's role in society. Nor had any Afghan ruler before the Taliban ever insisted on such dress codes as compulsory beards for men and the burqa. (Rashid, 110) The oppression of women became a standard of Taliban fundamentalism. They were purifying society to return it to its "natural" state, the one from their earlier lives. This idea of
superiority also kept the spirit of their forces high. Finally, the women's issue was a source of conflict with the West that the Taliban desired. Compromise would equal defeat. Therefore, Afghani women became clay that the Taliban could mold to motivate their troops, oppose the West, and characterize their ideology. Life under the Taliban is extremely difficult for women. This radical Islamic group has imposed many restrictions that violate their human rights according to international norms. Women can't work outside the home; they have no access to health care, or an opportunity for education. The inability to work hurts widows, the disabled, and those without male family members especially. They have no way to support themselves or their children. Because women can't attend a general hospital, they must resort to small clinics run by women practitioners. These clinics have limited resources. Disease, malnutrition, and depression are becoming more prevalent. Some schools for girls are run underground, or in individual homes, but this is dangerous. Boys, too, are suffering because most of the teachers were women. There are many other restrictions as well. Women can't leave home unless accompanied by a male relative. They must wear burqas -- long robes and veils that completely cover the body and allow three-inch square mesh-like fabric for vision. Heeled shoes are forbidden because they make noise while walking. Furthermore, women can't laugh loudly, gather publicly, or wear makeup. They have no legal representation and must paint the windows of their homes so others cannot see inside. Penalties for breaking these rules are extreme. They include stoning, whipping, verbal and sexual abuse, death, amputation, and torture. There are many stories of women who are beaten because an inch of their ankle is showing. Basically, the female gender is meant to not seen or heard outside of the home. Women are silent and soulless. The despair that this oppression and chaos creates is quite evident. Bibi Zohra is a widow who has six children and her parents to support. Yet, she has donated a piece of her land to create a bakery where a group of women she leads prepare nan-bread for those without food. She says: Look at my face, don't you see the tragedy of our lives and our country marked all over it? Day by day the situation is worsening. We have become beggars dependent on the UN to survive. It is not the Afghan way. Women are exhausted, depressed, and devastated. We are waiting for peace, praying for peace every minute of the day. (108) This is a common sentiment among Afghani women. They have seen their family members killed, their homes destroyed, their rights ripped away. And for what? Many struggle to find a reasonable justification from the Taliban for the conditions they impose. Nasiba Gul, a 1990 graduate of Kabul University says: The Taliban just want to trample women into the dust. No woman, not even the poorest or most conservative wants the Taliban to rule Afghanistan. Islam says women are equal to men and respect should be given to women. But the Taliban's actions are turning people against even Islam. (Rashid, 109-110) When the Taliban captured Kabul in 1996, Gul was forced to stop working and fled, like many others, to Pakistan. There have been many reactions to the treatment of women in Afghanistan. The differences in the responses from women's groups, the United Nations, and the United States give insight to why women's issues often become thrown into the blender of political agendas. First, since 1977 the Revolutionary Association of Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) has worked to give a voice to Afghani women. Based in Quetta, Pakistan, RAWA wants freedom, democracy, women's rights, and social justice. Before the Moscow coup in 1978, they mostly worked for rights. Now, however, they have become anti-fundamentalist. They believe they must fight the fanatical Taliban directly and make no compromises. RAWA isn't satisfied with the United Nations' negotiation with the Taliban and they continue to vocalize the need for the presence of foreign peacekeeping
groups in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, RAWA works with refugees in Pakistan and establishes schools and hospitals. Like other women's groups, such as the Women's Alliance for Peace and Human Rights in Afghanistan, RAWA strongly believes in emancipation. They are making an active effort to accomplish this goal. However, women's groups are in a compromised situation. They have a relatively small amount of funding or political power compared to influential governments. To succeed, they must plead to foreign powers to become involved, financially and militarily. This aid does not come very often, perhaps only when superpowers have their own interests in mind. Secondly, the United Nations, which was "established in 1945 by 51 countries committed to preserving peace through international cooperation and collective security", adds another perspective to the women's rights in Afghanistan. Until 1996, when the Taliban captured Kabul, the UN had a disastrous lack of policy concerning rights violations against Afghans. They drew much criticism from feminist groups who were horrified at the UN's lack of involvement (Rashid, 114). When the Taliban hung President Najibullah and began to restrict women, the international media abruptly awoke from its slumber. The UN had to respond. Finally, they released a statement that spoke of "maintaining and promoting the inherent equality and dignity of all people" and "not discriminating between the sexes, races, ethnic groups, or religions" (114). At the same time, they said "international agencies hold local customs and cultures in high respect" (114). It was a classic UN compromise -- they were upholding their image by recognizing the need for change and portraying a respect for cultural relativity. In effect, the Taliban were allowed to stall. The Taliban leadership realized that the UN was not prepared to stand up to them. Rashid adds: As each UN agency tried to cut its own deal with the Taliban, the UN compromised its principles, while Taliban restrictions on women only escalated. 'The UN is on a slippery slope. The UN thinks by making small compromises it can satisfy the international community and satisfy the Taliban. In fact it is doing neither,' the head of a European NGO told me. (113) By October 1996, the UN was forced to postpone eight projects for women in Kabul. The contradictions of their policy show how cautious an organization has to be in a political arena. In order to ensure their own success, they have to cater to both sides. Finally, the reaction of the United States to the situation of Afghani women is also ambiguous. Former Secretary of State Madeline Albright called the human rights conditions "despicable" (Loar, 2). America emphasized that the observance of rights is one of its highest foreign policy priorities. Also, it continually cites the aid that is given to organizations like the Red Cross to run programs that partially benefit Afghanistan. The United States refused to give diplomatic recognition to the Taliban or the Northern Alliance, which opposes them. It takes a neutral standpoint, but not toward "violations of international norms of behavior" (2). Karl Inderfurth, the Assistant Secretary of State for Southern Asian Affairs stresses: We call upon the Taliban to lift its restriction on the employment of women and the schooling of girls; we also call upon the Taliban and all factions to abide by internationally accepted norms of human rights. (3) Statements similar to this have been repeated many times. However, this is completely ineffective. "Calling" on the Taliban to do anything is ridiculously useless. The U.S. is simply declaring its position, nothing more. Former First Lady Hillary Clinton continues: We cannot allow these terrible crimes against women and girls -- and truly against all of humanity -- to continue with impunity. We must all make it unmistakably clear this terrible suffering inflicted on the women and girls of Afghanistan is not cultural, it is criminal. And we must do everything in our power to stop it. (Women and Girls in Afghanistan, 3) Perhaps Clinton's statement comes from her heart. Yet, there are other objectives behind this promotion of human rights.
The U.S. has to take this position because it is beneficial for the West to promote democracy. As Fatima Mernissi concludes: If choking civil society and investing in fundamentalism was a profitable strategy up to the mid-1980's, recent dislocations resulting from demographic pressure, unemployment, skyrocketing debt, the closing of Europe's immigration doors, and the IMF-induced state withdrawal from social services have made democratization in the Arab world the only feasible scenario for the twenty-first century. The key factor shaping the future will be whether all states, Eastern and Western, will accept 'global' responsibility for promoting freedom, pluralism, gender equality, and democracy, with the richest nations taking the lead. If Fukuyama's thesis that universalization is a compelling inclination of liberal democracies is correct, perhaps liberal bankers and arms producers may yet magically shift gear and begin funding Muslim women's free initiative to unveil, after having invested for decades in veiling pluralism in the Middle East. (45) Mernissi illustrates the shift between supporting fundamentalism and encouraging democracy. Now, in the 21st century, the West must change policy to benefit itself and the world. Perhaps, Mernissi argues, Muslim women will finally receive the financial and political support they need to establish rights. There are so many perspectives and contradictions within this issue of women's rights in Afghanistan. Islam is interpreted differently. The Western obligation to interfere presents theories of cultural relativism and activism. The Taliban's suppression of women stimulates their goal. The West fights for women in the name of democracy for their own success. And where does this leave women? They are trapped in a spinning ball being thrown violently back and forth between opposing teams. No matter what they do to puncture that suppression, it persists. They are flung, spun, and shot in different directions in a battle to win control. Whether universal human rights exist or not, they are stuck in a pressured vacuum. Perhaps, one of these teams will realize that a respect for the ball will fuel their success. When a partnership is finally established between political powers and the female population of Afghanistan, women will be able to take effective leaps toward their freedom. Until then, they are caught hopelessly bouncing.