

Obama, ask Afghan women!

By Ingeborg Breines
Former director UNESCO
Vice president the International Peace Bureau.

Speech given at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO), Oslo, Norway, together with Dorota Gierycz

27th December 2008

As representative in Pakistan of the United Nations' Organization for Education, Science and Culture as of 11.09.01, I also had responsibility for UNESCO's work in Afghanistan until UNESCO, as the rest of the UN system, bilateral embassies and international NGOs moved their offices from Islamabad to Kabul.

On the 8 March 2002 the international celebrations of the International Women's Day took place in Kabul in an attempt to support a more progressive view on women's role and status than under the Taliban regime. Several UN organizations joined hands with the newly appointed Minister of Women's Affairs (Sima Samar) to organize this historic event in the ruins of a cinema house. The Director of UNIFEM, Noeleen Heyzer was there, as well as the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Mary Robinson and the Minister of Women's Affairs from Pakistan, Attiya Inayatullah, long term member of the Executive Board of UNESCO. Those of us who came from the outside were full of optimism and expectation to a new era. It was, however, resignation that we could see expressed in the faces of the Afghan women.

We had invited women from different parts of the country to a 2-3 days seminar. They arrived in their burkas, which they took off once inside only with women. Their male partners were waiting outside. It soon became evident that these women did not believe in any quick solution to the social and political difficulties in Afghanistan. They had experienced that also the Taliban came as liberators, after the violence and rivalry of the Mujahedin and the local warlords. Communism and the Soviet had brought ideals of emancipation of women and women's education in the 1970ies and 80ies. This had also been tried in the 1920ies. Hardly ever have so many teachers been killed and schools destroyed as when the extremist religious groups started to see the Soviet building of schools as a manipulation to undermine Afghan culture and religion – and the traditional role of women.

The seminar participants were clear both as to their description of "reality" and as to their priorities, despite the lack of enthusiasm and hope of an early improvement of their situation. They complained about a generalized lack of respect for women, about poverty and an excessive workload, about restricted freedom for women within the family, no freedom of expression, severely restrained possibilities for geographical mobility, a pervasive preference for boys – and that all decision-making remained with the men. In short, they complained about the patriarchal power structures.

They wanted education for girls and women (including married girls/women), access to basic health care including in connection with pregnancy and birth-giving (Afghanistan is ranking on the top as for maternal and child mortality), access to work, to own land and establish your own bank-account, possibilities to participate actively in political life,

including the right to have an identity card allowing you to travel and to vote - and access to the media so that women's voices could be heard. They wanted research on the role of women in Afghan families, in working life and in society in general. They wanted a halt to child marriages, to the selling of young girls for land and to sexual misuse of children, not least of young boys.

But what they insisted on was that the UN should help in disarming the country. They expressed a profound fear of the many weapons floating around increasing the risk of fatal "accidents" both in the home and outside. (As Mark Twain said: If you only have a hammer in your toolbox, you will be looking for nails.)

Later studies have confirmed that disarmament is a top priority of the majority of Afghans (Human Rights and Advocacy Consortium, 2004). A report from the Independent Human Rights Commission of Afghanistan (January 2008) also showed that rape over the last years broadly have been undertaken by armed men.

To ameliorate the situation of Afghan women was a prominently pronounced goal of the attack on the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan as of October 2002. Now, some seven years later there is all reason to ask if we have given Afghan women weapons for bread - the exact opposite of what they asked for and need. Perhaps now is the time to listen to what they have to say.

The Canadian researcher Cheshmak Farhoumand-Sims wrote in the International Journal (June 2007) about the many unfulfilled promises to women in the post-Taliban Afghanistan. She refers to her own study for UNIFEM in 2003 where Afghan women express anger because "Western forces had co-opted their suffering to legitimize a strong military presence in their land and that "the war against terror", as they have learned to know it, only would bring more suffering to the people and strengthen the insurgency". Other studies also show that the growing support of the Taliban in many regions often is due to the continued presence of foreign troops in the country, as well as to the lack of humanitarian assistance and development aid. The views of (some) Afghan women on the Western, non-Muslim, military presence in Afghanistan was expressed in the 8 March statement (2008) by women in Kandahar: "We believe that only Afghans themselves can stop the use of violence against other Afghans". The strong military presence seems to serve to reinforce the macho power-structures, as well as the hegemonic masculine ideals.

The Norwegian Prime Minister, Jens Stoltenberg, got standing ovation in the ECOSOC meeting in Geneva, July 2006, when he proudly claimed that Norway was not rich primarily because of the oil, but because of Norwegian women, who combine being among the most active workforce in the world with giving birth to more children than what is average in the Western world. I would guess that the Norwegian government would get very strong applause from peace-loving people around the world if they were to use the same type of argument in relation to Afghanistan. Afghan women are probably a much greater asset to Afghanistan than its geopolitical situation of closeness to the Central Asian oil reserves that so many would like to have access to

It seems to get obvious to more and more people that a military presence cannot solve the underlying problems in Afghanistan - and how could anybody be as naïve at the outset? Many, however, including the US President elect, believe in a strengthened military presence combined with strengthened humanitarian efforts. The attempts to

legitimize military presence by insisting on the need to protect the humanitarian efforts (to win the minds and the hearts) and the mixing up of military and humanitarian interventions, is highly dangerous to the humanitarian work and workers and is probably also a prolongation of the conflict. If the American President elect instead were to listen to Afghan women, the likely positive effects would be felt worldwide.

If we think that the Afghan women could serve as agents of positive change, we should go way beyond the mere rhetoric of working for their well-being and emancipation/empowerment which more often seems as an excuse for seeking to meet ones own economic, political or military goals. Instead there is a need to take their priorities seriously and seek to enhance both their competence building and their possibilities to use their insight and knowledge to create social justice and build peace.

A Norwegian female physiotherapist got international acclaim when she presented a new thesis for healing an aching part of the body, by insisting not to touch the sick part, but instead strengthen the adjacent healthy parts so that they in turn could heal what aches. If the aching part is for instance the elbow, then the upper and lower arm should be strengthened to allow them to make the elbow well again. There are many “elbows” in Afghanistan. To strengthen the “female upper- and underarm” would probably entail the best help the Afghan society can get.

I chose to believe that Obama, with the help of Hilary, would be willing to listen to the women and ready to help build a culture of peace in Afghanistan.

Ingeborg Breines

Former director UNESCO

Vice president the International Peace Bureau.