



Why U.S. can't deliver women's rights to Afghanistan

By: Malou Innocent – April 2, 2013

During his recent unannounced visit to Afghanistan, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry met with prominent female entrepreneurs and the captain of the women's soccer team to discuss the hard-won progress of Afghan women and their uncertain future. Like his predecessor, Secretary Kerry has admirably pledged to prioritize women's rights in his foreign policy agenda. But the underpinnings of this pledge – the entrenchment of women's rights across Afghanistan – are beyond the ability of the United States to uphold. It is time to stop making promises we cannot keep.

If the past 12 years in Afghanistan (and Iraq) has taught us anything, it's that we are not very good at spreading Western-style, Jeffersonian democracy – and all the attendant rights – to foreign cultures. In the end, our military and diplomacy cannot transform deep-rooted societal norms. The future of Afghan women deserves U.S. support, but not a false promise tied to the open-ended presence of U.S. troops. Undoubtedly, since the overthrow of the Taliban regime, the quality of life for many Afghan women has undergone extraordinary transformations. But the progress may be illusionary. As Reuter's senior correspondent in Afghanistan Amie Ferris-Rotman argued in *Foreign Policy* last month, President Hamid Karzai has been “increasingly ambivalent on women's rights,” and the local government has failed to motivate Afghan society at large to adopt new habits to accept gender equality.

Misogynistic warlords and conservative Afghan traditionalists still wield considerable influence over traditions and customs that govern property rights, marriage and divorce, inheritance, and custody. Despite women's constitutionally guaranteed rights, fundamentalists in parliament and government ministries continue indigenous cultural prohibitions that discriminate against women.

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In addition, women's rights activists observe that forced marriages involving young girls remain common. Beatings, torture, and other forms of domestic violence against Afghan women persist. Worse, women and girls are often shot, stabbed, or even stoned to death in honor killings when captured for running away from their abusers. Because Afghan society's acceptance of women's social and legal rights has yet to take root organically, from the bottom up, the most viable alternative for changing its long-standing customs and social practices would be top-down with the help of the international community. But as University of California Santa Barbara Assistant Professor Robert W. Rauchhaus has noted, third parties willing to protect a discriminated minority would need to focus not only on the group that is at risk – Afghan women – but also on more effective punishments against those who provoke violence against that discriminated minority, namely Afghan traditionalists.

America's reluctance to punish domestic parties resistant to Afghan social change highlights what the late political scientist Samuel Huntington argued in his influential book *The Clash of Civilizations*.

Huntington wrote that Western attempts to impose its will onto foreign societies is "contrary to the Western values of self-determination and democracy." Indeed, what truly "clashes" is the liberal tolerance of diverse cultures and perspectives against the liberal interventions intended to spread liberty. Principles aside, the extent to which methods of punishment and exclusion would incite an internal rebellion also raises a practical problem.

Before the nearly 40 year reign of King Zahir Shah, who oversaw Afghanistan's most prolonged period of prosperity and internal stability during the middle of the 20th century, King Amanullah had made repeated attempts to reform the Afghan state. The Ataturk-style modernist styled himself a "revolutionary ruler." He demanded Afghans wear Western-style suits and hats in government precincts in Kabul. He changed the Friday weekly holiday to Thursday. And he pushed to end the seclusion of women and abolish the veil. The pace of his reforms proved far too fast for the country to absorb, and he was overthrown in a coup in 1929.

Today, although current foreign-led efforts meant to assist Afghan women remain morally defensible, they tell us little about the unforeseen consequences that arise when operating in a foreign culture. The most contentious issues between the Afghan state and society have been policies concerning the rights of women, marriage, and other issues deeply rooted in Afghan cultural values and the social framework of Islam.

Sadly, while many Afghan women justifiably fear that their progress could be undone if the Taliban reemerge onto the political scene, the past 12 years have underscored the enormous difficulty of advancing democracy in general and women's rights in particular.

Secretary Kerry is right to speak out against gender-based oppression and other affronts to human rights and individual freedom. But emphasizing local drivers of social change can be a more effective way to export Western liberal values to Afghanistan's illiberal society. The United States and its coalition partners can continue to support independent media and other local institutions in Afghanistan even after they remove their soldiers. That assistance would recognize that gender relations are firmly embedded in values and traditions that command local legitimacy.

This legitimacy will not come from an indefinite commitment by the United States in aid and troops. Like the other gains reaped during the 12-year occupation, without developing institutions and norms in the context of Afghan culture, the transformation of women's rights may ultimately prove ephemeral. Secretary Kerry and others in Washington should be honest and admit our limitations. The United States can offer support, but it cannot deliver women's rights to Afghanistan.