

Affaires courantes et commentaires

Current issues and comments

An identity of strength

Personal thoughts on women in Afghanistan

TAIBA RAHIM*

*The desire in the female for the male
is so that they may perfect each other's work.
God put desire in man and woman
in order that the world should be preserved by this union.*

Mevlana Jalaluddin RUMI (1207-1273), Mathnawi III (4414-4416).¹

The fate of Afghan women during the Taliban regime and following the 11 September 2001 attacks has been the focus of considerable attention in both Western media and academia. There was a significant amount of debate in human rights and governmental circles about their suffering. Documentaries, at times produced at great personal risk to their authors, and even cinema productions such as *Kandahar*, the film by the Iranian director Mohsen Makhmalbaf, have dealt with their plight.

After more than two decades of conflict, hardship and pain, many of us felt both moved by and grateful for such attention. There was a sense of emerging from a period of oblivion and looking ahead to dedicated support for change. At the same time, one was led to reflect about the nature of the coverage that took place and the types of perceptions that were communicated. Which were the issues that made the headlines with particular intensity? The role of women in Islam, the “dictatorship” of the *burka*,² a systematic image of women as victims, among others. Yet the more one read and the more one watched, the more difficult it became to escape the feeling

* Taiba Rahim has a degree in pedagogical studies from the University of Kabul. She worked as a teacher in Kabul in the early 1990s until the conflict led to the closure of the University. Between 1993 and 1995, she worked for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Kabul in the field of dissemination of international humanitarian law. From mid-1995 to early 1997, she worked for the ICRC in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the fields of protection and dissemination. The author is currently involved in a variety of initiatives related to Afghanistan.

that, while a great deal had been heard *about* Afghan women, little had actually been heard *from* them. This was disturbing, since true understanding can result only from dialogue and thus from a readiness, not first of all to judge and to project one's certainty on to *others*, but to listen to and learn from *others*.

It is important in analysing the identity and situation of women in Afghanistan to accept that nothing is simply black and white but necessarily complex. In the following pages, I shall make a modest attempt to address some of the issues at hand.

Women and Islam

For every Afghan woman Islam is a determining factor which essentially influences every aspect of life. To discuss matters of religion when one is neither a scholar nor a student in that field may be a sensitive undertaking. However, I come from a family in which the Holy Quran was the central reference and its verses were both recited and debated. My father was a man of principle and values, who saw no contradiction between adhering fully to the teachings of the Prophet and encouraging his daughters to seek an education.

Islam is often considered as a religion oppressive towards women. Yet if one goes back to the early days, one finds that the rulings of the first Muslims included progress in aspects such as marriage, inheritance, the outlawing of female infanticide, etc. Arguably not sufficient to live up to the expectations of men or women in many 21st-century societies, but certainly important at the time.

The Prophet Muhammad established a tradition whereby his fellow Muslims were instructed, when he set out on a journey beyond Medina, to consult his wife Aisha if they had any problems of a religious nature to settle. After Muhammad's death, Aisha remained a central authority on the Prophet's life and religious practice.

Professor Leila Ahmed, an Egyptian-born scholar, stresses in one of her books that Islam originally set out on a struggle for equity. Women initially asked Muhammad why the Quran referred only to men, despite the fact that women also followed God and his Prophet. It appears that this questioning "led to the revelation of the Quranic verses explicitly addressing women as

1 Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi, *Jewels of Remembrance*, selected and translated by Camille and Kabir Helminski, Threshold Books, Putney, Vermont, 1996, p. 48.

2 Also known as *chadri*, the *burka* is a garment that covers the entire body, including the face.

well as men (...), a response that unequivocally shows Muhammad's (and God's) readiness to hear women".³

In other words, "Among the remarkable features, particularly in comparison with the scriptures of other monotheistic traditions, is that women are explicitly addressed: one passage in which this occurs declares (...) the absolute moral and spiritual equality of men and women.

For Muslim men and women,
 For believing men and women,
 For devout men and women,
 For true (truthful) men and women,
 For men and women who are
 Patient and constant, for men
 And women who humble themselves,
 For men and women who give
 In charity, for men and women
 Who fast (and deny themselves),
 For men and women who
 Guard their chastity,
 For men and women who
 Engage in God's praise,
 For them has God prepared
 Forgiveness and a great reward."⁴

This little known or mostly misunderstood dimension of the Islamic tradition is of great significance to many women in Muslim societies today. "The unmistakable presence of an ethical egalitarianism explains why Muslim women frequently insist, often inexplicably to non-Muslims, that Islam is not sexist. They hear and read in its sacred text, justly and legitimately, a different message from that heard by the makers and enforcers of orthodox, androcentric Islam."⁵

It is an unfortunate reality that the Quran has since then frequently been used to justify the social status quo and gender inequality. This may be illustrated by the issue of polygamy, originally conceived by the Prophet Muhammad as a way of protecting women. It allowed, for example, girls who had been orphaned to be married, while insisting that a man could take

³ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*, Yale University Press, Yale, 1992, p. 72.

⁴ Holy Quran, Sura 33:35, quoted in Ahmed, *ibid.*, pp. 64-65.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

more than one wife only if he could ensure a decent administration of her property. Today, that notion of social legislation has unfortunately been turned into a pretext for many men to justify outright chauvinism. This is, however, hardly limited to Islam alone and is certainly no justification to belittle its achievements, teachings and values altogether.

The following comment from Karen Armstrong, a respected religious writer, is interesting in that context:

“In Europe we are beginning to realize that we have often misinterpreted and undermined other traditional cultures in our former colonies and protectorates, and many Muslim women today, even those who have been brought up in the West, find it extremely offensive when Western feminists condemn their culture as misogynist. Most religions have been male affairs and have a patriarchal bias, but it is a mistake to see Islam as more at fault in that respect than any other tradition. (...) It is often a rejection of the Western (...) attitude which claims to understand their tradition better than they do themselves.”⁶

It may be worth noting that many of us Muslim women in fact feel a mixture of attraction and rejection. We are attracted to the apparent freedom enjoyed by Western men and women, yet we do indeed find offensive the patronizing tone with which our traditions are at times portrayed.

One of the main flaws in the Western attitude is the inescapable impression that its focus on certain countries or situations is politically motivated. Take the example of Iran, where many women faced immense hardship during the reign of the Shah. However, their plight became an issue in the West mainly after the regime changed in 1979 and the country — now an Islamic Republic — moved from the status of an ally to that of a foe. Today women in Iran still face significant difficulties and oppression, but they go to school and university, occupy important positions in parliament, work as lawyers, engineers, and so forth. This is far more than can be said of Saudi Arabia, a traditional Western ally. Yet it takes no long investigation of media records to find that the fate of Saudi women is much less the object of review than that of their Iranian sisters.

Ironically, therefore, what emerges is an image of a West particularly concerned about the women in countries where its actual ability to influence change is limited (Iran, Afghanistan during the Taliban regime), whereas, in countries where it possesses both the contacts and the clout that would enable it to contribute to gradual change, it appears less eager to do so.

6 Karen Armstrong, *Muhammad: A Biography of the Prophet*, Victor Gollancz, London, 1991, p. 199.

Another result of a generally negative coverage of the situation of women in Muslim societies is a tendency to overlook the importance of their roles. The repetitive use of the word “victim” dehumanizes women. In a country affected by a long war, such as Afghanistan, this phenomenon is accentuated even more. Coverage of the situation of women and girls in conflict focuses almost exclusively on their perceived vulnerability. As was pointed out in a study by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC):

“Women (...) tend to be categorized as only ‘vulnerable’, yet they are not necessarily vulnerable and even display remarkable strength. (...) women throughout the world are showing not only that they can be extremely courageous and resilient but also that they can put their ingenuity and coping skills to full use in their daily roles as heads of household, breadwinners, and care-providers within their families, and active participants in the life of their communities, as employees of international organizations and NGOs, and as campaigners for change, agents for peace, etc.”⁷

In Afghanistan, despite numerous obstacles — social, religious and others — women have played a very important part in holding society together and are likely to do so again in the upcoming reconstruction process.

Women in Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a country with a proud sense of its traditions and religion. It is a country where the status of women differs greatly from one region to another. In general terms, women in rural areas lead a harsh and unforgiving life. Their main role is to run the family and raise the children, but they also carry out difficult agricultural work, planting the fields or acting as shepherds. In some of Afghanistan’s northern provinces, girls and women make carpets, another painful job. Levels of education normally remain low, aiming mainly to provide the basic knowledge required for these occupations.

In towns, opportunities for education, in particular before the war, were more widespread for girls. In Kabul, for example, my parents’ generation saw the gradually increasing employment of women as secretaries, nurses, etc. Later, when I went to university, there were quite a number of female teachers, engineers and doctors being trained.

An element that women in urban and rural areas have traditionally had in common is their responsibility in keeping the household together, in

⁷ Charlotte Lindsey, *Women Facing War: ICRC Study on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Women*, ICRC, Geneva, 2001, p. 29.

particular by controlling the family's budget. Whatever amount of money made its way into the family would rapidly be taken over by the wife or mother. The role of women in this regard has been recognized as crucial in many developing nations. In Afghanistan, too, the greater sense of discipline and responsibility found in women was important in managing the limited resources available. In my own family, for instance, with an average of twelve to fourteen people to take care of at any given time, my mother often performed miracles, managing to feed us on my father's modest salary.

One of the greatest tragedies experienced by many Afghan women is the high level of illiteracy. This is true throughout the country, but very much so in the Hazara community.⁸ For a combination of political, economic and social reasons women of this ethnic group traditionally enjoyed fewer opportunities in terms of education, although their fathers and husbands were on the whole open to such prospects.

The first of Afghanistan's rulers to have given the issue of equal rights a measure of consideration was King Amanullah, who reigned from 1919 to 1929. He placed great emphasis on education and introduced "a number of measures designed to improve the position of women and girls and to change gender-related customs. He banned child-marriage, transferred the regulation of family affairs from the clergy to the state, outlawed polygamy among civil servants, permitted women to discard the veil (...)"⁹ Like other subsequent reformers he found, however, that in many conservative circles in the country such changes were perceived as a threat.

Nevertheless, with every passing decade, small advances were made. But the war which broke out in the late 1970s exacerbated what was already a harsh reality. The twenty-two years of conflict have resulted in tremendous instability and great suffering for our people. This has been particularly true for women. As I have personally witnessed both in my own country and later in Bosnia-Herzegovina, civilians, and in particular women and girls, are among the first to be attacked. There is nothing more humiliating to the male combatant or civilian than to see his wife, sister or mother harassed or violated. This is precisely the enemy's intention when targeting women.

⁸ The Hazara are one of Afghanistan's ethnic communities, representing approximately 20 per cent of the population. They are of the Shi'a faith and have traditionally been subjected to political and economic oppression.

⁹ Peter Marsden, *The Taliban: War, Religion and the New Order in Afghanistan*, Zed Books Ltd., London, 1998, p. 93.

“Gross violations of international humanitarian law regarding personal safety are frequently committed. These acts or threats can occur in all phases of a conflict, whether the victims remain within their homes or communities, whilst fleeing, whilst displaced, when returning, during periods of tension leading up to the conflict, during the conflict or after the conflict has ended. (...) Armed conflict may dramatically increase the number of armed forces and weapons in an area populated by civilians, heightening tension and bringing the conflict close to the civilians. (...) Owing to the proximity of the fighting and/or the presence of arms bearers, women invariably have to restrict their movements: this severely limits their access to supplies of water and food and limits their ability to tend their animals and crops, to exchange news and information and to seek community or family support.”¹⁰

In Afghanistan, women have on the one hand been directly affected by the fighting, facing death, injury, threats to their lives and personal integrity. On the other hand, they have had to take great risks in trying to provide for the survival of their families and their own survival. Simple things such as collecting water from what used to be a nearby well became a nightmare when minefields were laid, as did trying to reach a once accessible local market when a checkpoint suddenly appeared on the way. It is difficult to describe the gut-wrenching fear, the cold sweat, the trembling of the entire body when faced with the sheer unpredictability of a group of fighters. When they board the bus you are travelling on, you know that at any time they have the power and self-proclaimed right to remove you or another passenger from the vehicle. The feeling of being so totally at someone's mercy is a fear that never leaves you. You simply do not look at other human beings in quite the same way ever again.

One of the war's most lasting effects is the reality of widowhood. As a result of the conflict in my country, countless men lost their lives or disappeared without a trace, leaving women to cope with the trauma and the consequences. In Kabul alone, estimates of the number of widows run into the tens of thousands. This has had and will continue to have a huge impact on our social development.

At the same time, it must also be said that the strong internal solidarity, the powerful tradition of hospitality and the special importance of the family bond mean that Afghan society as a whole has been able to absorb some of the shocks it has experienced. Even today, after so much pain

¹⁰ Lindsey, *op. cit.* (note 7), pp. 43-44.

inflicted, it is possible to travel to remote and impoverished places in my country and be welcomed and fed in a generous manner.

The strong sense of family and the resulting obligation to protect the honour of women have led to the remarriage of a number of widows to the brothers or cousins of their deceased husbands. This might appear contrary to the ideal of free choice, but in a society like that of Afghanistan, where resources are few and where war has devastated the social safety net, these local traditions and practices are important surviving factors of stability.

The solidarity between women was strengthened by gatherings such as those during religious festivals. Throughout the war, *Eid* and *Nawruz* celebrations were opportunities to dress nicely, visit friends, relatives and neighbours, share sweets and chat. While the holidays lasted officially between one and three days, among women the gatherings would extend over a couple of weeks. Women would obviously also get together on sadder occasions, for instance when visiting the mother, wife, sister or daughter of someone killed or missing.

Women under the Taliban regime

To describe in a few words the experience of war is not easy. One day, it simply engulfs you, your family, community and village. Everything you took for granted — the simple, reassuring things of life — disappears from one moment to the next. With every passing day you are convinced that it will all soon be over, and then all at once, 22 years later, you realize that you are still caught up in it and begin to think it will never end.

Men in my country have suffered immensely. They were recruited, many times against their will, they were arrested, tortured and so often killed in brutal ways. Women have faced humiliation, rape, beatings, forced separation and endless exile.

What we experienced under the Taliban, however, went beyond anything that could be imagined in the worst of times.¹¹ They seized power with a promise to restore security and dignity for all. After the chaos of the early nineties there were some improvements on the security front, but this came at an unbearable price.

¹¹ The Taliban, literally meaning “the students”, appeared as a group in 1994. I left Kabul in 1995, a few months after the Taliban took control of Kandahar. I thus have no firsthand experience of my country under their rule. My comments are based on my knowledge of Afghanistan and on the information I gathered over the years.

From one day to the next, women were forced to abandon their workplaces and to withdraw to their homes; they were prevented from engaging in any type of activity outside their immediate family circle and were not authorized to move beyond their homes in the absence of a male member of the family. The zeal of the Taliban focused in particular on urban centres like Kabul and Mazar, where the religious police took the harshest action. In areas such as the south and south-east of the country, the situation was much as it always had been. For example, while female employment in health centres in Kabul was a complex struggle throughout the Taliban rule, the hospital in Kandahar had women nurses at all times.

One of the things that the Taliban will be most seriously blamed for is the disastrous image and reputation they have given our country. Internally, they rubbed salt into numerous wounds inflicted upon the population during the previous fifteen years of conflict. They instilled a fear in people's minds from which it will be difficult to recover. Every passing day seemed to be a year. People tried to adapt to the strict regulations imposed, but the environment remained entirely unpredictable. People could be suddenly arrested, beaten ...

Women, who were traditionally forced to live under male domination, were now confronted with a religious extremism that sought to maintain them in submission. The treatment was cruel to an extent that is hard to describe. On the other hand, there is little doubt in my mind that the women who endured this terrible time lost little of their determination and creativity. If anything, they knew even more clearly what matters in life.

From a distance, one thing I came to regret was that the international community appeared on the whole reluctant to challenge the Taliban leadership through dialogue. I am not suggesting that this would have been an easy thing. I am uneasy, however, about the nature of the demonization that took place, such as when any member of a Pashtun tribe was immediately considered a Taliban.

The lack of dialogue meant a number of lost opportunities to address matters of importance to the population. To make general statements of concern about the situation of women and to call upon the Taliban to abide by international standards from the relative distance and security of Western capitals may at times have been important, but was certainly not sufficient. To sit down with the Taliban and negotiate specific issues, *inter alia* improved conditions for women, might have proved more effective. Under the prevailing circumstances, the prospects for Western statements about the situation

of women — or, to give another example, the preservation of the Bamiyan Buddhas¹² — to have an impact on the Taliban were poor.

This is in contrast to attempts by international agencies to negotiate on the spot with the Taliban leadership. Discussions took place, for instance, over the summer of 1997 between the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Taliban and were partly successful in ensuring *equal access to health care for women*.¹³

The *burka* and women's identity

One issue that became highly publicized in the West during the Taliban rule is the *burka*, a traditional garment that covers women from head to toe. In the eyes of many, the *burka* came to symbolize the suffering of Afghan women at the hands of the Taliban.

It is important to note that the *burka* was by no means introduced by the Taliban. Afghan women have been wearing it for several centuries and it is generally considered to have made its way into Afghanistan from the Indian subcontinent. It is part of the everyday life of many women. This is true within my own family. Interestingly, it was more widespread in towns than in villages. Indeed, for women involved in hard agricultural work, a *burka* is a very impractical piece of clothing. Women in rural areas would wear a simple shawl and use the *burka* only when travelling.

There have been attempts in the history of Afghanistan to put an end to its use. As I mentioned above, King Amanullah tried to have it banned. Then during the late seventies, when the regime changed and the Soviet-backed government took over, the leadership tried to push through changes in a way that was too sudden and brutal for many Afghans. They used intimidation in the attempt to force women to abandon the *burka*. Although the objective was something positive, namely to enhance their participation in social life, the approach was misguided. It provoked a traditionalist response to a sensitive issue.

My point here is by no means to advocate the apparent merits of the *burka*. I personally never liked it and rarely used it. Its most disagreeable fea-

¹² See in this regard the interesting review, by a long-standing Afghanistan expert, of the process that led to their destruction in the spring of 2001: Pierre Centlivres, *Les Buddhas d'Afghanistan*, Favre, Lausanne, 2001.

¹³ For an overview of the relations between international organizations and the Taliban, see Peter Marsden, *op. cit.* (note 9).

ture is its deeply dehumanizing effect, concealing a woman's face — and thus her identity — entirely.

Conversely, to make an obsession out of the *burka* as such does little to reveal that identity. Behind the *burka*, women laugh and cry, hope and despair. They sing and fall in love and follow a beloved man with their eyes. One expression thereof may be found among the Pashtun women, who are famous for their short songs — known as *landay* — filled with worries and hopes, which celebrate nature, mountains, valleys, forests, rivers, dawn and dusk, and seek inspiration in war and honour, shame and love, beauty and death:

*“En secret je brûle, en secret je pleure,
Je suis la femme pashtoune qui ne peut dévoiler
son amour.”*¹⁴

In a society where feelings were repressed and freedom of movement often limited, the *burka* ironically became a means to move unnoticed and to take part more actively in social life than most people would imagine. In that sense, women behind the *burka* were no less determined, no less strong, no less filled with emotions and projects than any other women on this planet.

Having lived and worked in Europe in recent years, I was very much struck by the extent to which the media made that item of clothing a central issue. This had positive aspects, such as raising awareness. I have met many people who were very genuinely concerned and supportive about our future. A number of journalists, several of them women, travelled to Afghanistan to collect testimonies from their Afghan sisters about their life and suffering.

The mass of reporting has had less appealing sides as well. Frequently, the focus on women and on the *burka* was used to ridicule Muslim societies and Afghanistan as a whole. The underlying message was of a backward country and people, unable to join the mainstream values and behaviour of the “modern world”. It is interesting to compare this with observations made by Leila Ahmed about similar trends in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries:

“(…) the thesis of the new colonial discourse of Islam (centered on women) was that Islam was innately and immutably oppressive to women, that the veil and segregation epitomized that oppression, and that these customs were the fundamental reasons for the backwardness of Islamic societies. Only if these practices “intrinsic” to Islam (and there-

¹⁴ Sayd Bahodine Majrouh, *Le suicide et le chant: poésie populaire des femmes pashtounes*, Gallimard, Paris, 1994, p. 47.

fore Islam itself) were cast off could Muslim societies begin to move forward on the path of civilization. Veiling — to Western eyes, the most visible marker of the differentness and inferiority of Islamic societies — became the symbol now of both the oppression of women (...) and the backwardness of Islam, and it became the open target of colonial attack and the spearhead of the assault on Muslim societies. (...) colonialism's use of feminism to promote the culture of the colonizers and undermine native culture has ever since imparted to feminism in non-Western societies the taint of having served as an instrument of colonial domination, rendering it suspect (...) and vulnerable to the charge of being an ally of colonial interests. That taint has undoubtedly hindered the feminist struggle within Muslim societies."¹⁵

In today's environment, the message from Western women has on many occasions been one of genuine solidarity. On the other hand, however, the mainstream reporting was frequently characterized by an irritating superiority complex, implying that the freedom that Western women today enjoy has always been there, something of a trademark. My knowledge of European history is incomplete, but my understanding is that the important progress accomplished in the status and position of women was not the simple result of a decree. It came after years, decades and centuries of struggle, often of very resolute struggle.

Generations that followed began to take these achievements for granted and understandably made the most of them. Many of these achievements are distinctly envied in the Muslim world. However, it would be mistaken to think that each society moves at the same pace, along the same path, at the same time. I would dare to go as far as suggesting that the women with the greatest strength in the world are today found in the developing world. They are the ones engaged in struggles, very determined struggles. They are the ones — like their European sisters previously — who are seeking to obtain more respect, better security, improved employment opportunities.

This brings me back to why the media focus on the *burka* surprised me so much. There are women throughout Afghanistan who feel strongly that the *burka* should be thrown away. They should be allowed to do so. There are others who feel strongly that it should be kept. They should also be allowed to do so. In practical terms, though, this is far from being the most urgent problem facing Afghan women. Security, access to health facilities, to education and to jobs are far more important. Obtaining the means to resume a

¹⁵ Ahmed, *op. cit.* (note 3), pp.152-153 and 167.

normal life is a pressing need after so many years of conflict. International staff or observers in Afghanistan should not judge or analyse the Afghan situation on the basis of how many women will be seen to no longer wear the *burka* in months to come. International media should not confine themselves to hailing the “reopening of schools for girls”. They should check if the government gave the means to build the benches, to buy the blackboard or to pay a teacher.

A look to the future

During a recent trip to London, I spent time in some of the bookshops there in search of material that might prove useful in preparing this article, but to my surprise there was little to be found on the shelves of sections dealing with Central Asia, Religion or Gender. Attentive staff eagerly browsed through their computer files, highlighting a few titles and apologizing for the somewhat lengthy delivery periods to be expected. Had the situation of women in my country, I came to wonder, truly moved out of sight again so quickly?

I realized that it was legitimate that interest and focus had moved to the Middle East, to southern Africa and Kashmir. In any case, the answer to Afghanistan's problems will first and foremost have to come from inside. Just as, more broadly, the evolution of the situation of women in Muslim societies will continue from within.

Like many other people, I followed the *Loya Jirgah*¹⁶ that took place in early June this year. There were some interesting aspects to this gathering. First of all, over 200 of 1,500 delegates were women, an unprecedented event, and several of them made statements very critical of the Mujaheddin factions. Secondly, of the three persons to stand for the post of President of Afghanistan, one was a woman, Massouda Jalal, who spoke of her ambition to work for all Afghans, both women and men. Finally, President Hamid Karzai made specific reference to his vision of a greater role for women in Afghan society.

It may be wondered where these women came from, after so many years when little was heard from them or reported about them. Well, they were in the shadows, in their compounds, behind their *burkas* or in exile. They were among those who had benefited from an education in the 1960s, 70s and 80s and were prepared to engage in political debate. But now, as one observer

¹⁶ Grand Assembly of elders, religious and tribal leaders.

noted: "It is up to us (women) to operate in a politically disciplined and mature manner and ensure that we present a common voice. We will be working not against men but on behalf of all Afghanistan, yet we can expect some harsh responses (...)."17

I firmly believe that women in Afghanistan, despite the tremendous pain they have endured, are very different from the simplistic image of victims that normally accompanies them. There are many examples of countries where women's rights were taken into greater consideration during or at the end of a conflict: "Armed conflicts greatly affect the lives of women and can completely change their role in the family and the 'public' domain. (...) The breakdown or disintegration of family and community networks forces women to assume new roles."18

Afghanistan has experienced this situation as well and will continue to do so, albeit in its own way. Whether men like it or not, women will inevitably assume more active roles outside their homes in the future. We will bring about our own transformation and will do so in accordance with our own core values and traditions, first among them those arising from Islam.

Jamila Mujahed sums up the feeling of many when she writes that:

"We are also hoping for (...) sustained support from the international women's community. Afghans are saddened by the events of September 11 but they also know that but for that tragedy, no one would have come to our aid, none of the great changes in Afghanistan would have occurred (...)."19

In the months ahead, the foremost concern for both men and women will be that of security, and UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan is right to have repeatedly called for a broadening of the mandate of the International Security Assistance Force. Beyond that, education will be crucial and should remain high on the list of priorities of the government of President Karzai.

Hundreds of civil servants in Foreign and Cooperation Ministries in industrialized nations, members of their embassies, diplomats and staff at the UN in New York and Geneva, as well as representatives of humanitarian organizations, deal with one aspect or another of the situation of my country. Some of them undoubtedly have the future of women on their agendas.

17 Jamila Mujahed, *Stepping out of the Shadows*, Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 17 June 2002, available at: <http://www.iwpr.net>.

18 Lindsey, *op. cit.* (note 7), p. 30.

19 Mujahed, *op. cit.* (note 17).

My conviction is that the best way to support women in my country is to help create an environment conducive to change, but in the end to let the women of Afghanistan themselves choose the way, the speed and the priorities.

