**Empowering themselves**

BY R A F I A Z A K A R I A 2021-09-01

THE goal of course was never to save Afghan women. Everyone in Afghanistan and the surrounding region knew this. But the superpower was in a bloodthirsty mood, the tragedy of 9/11 dictated the need for vengeance. Afghanistan had not been involved in the attacks at all but Saudi Arabia, from where the majority of the attackers actually originated, could not be attacked as that would disrupt the world`s and America`s own economy.

Afghanistan, already addled by decades of foreign occupation and CIA proxy wars, was the answer.

The bombings began in the autumn of 2001 and they have continued right to the end. To provide a cover story regarding the necessity of the invasion they couldn`t openly state vengeance as a reason they latched on to the deplorable condition of women`s rights in the country. It was true, Afghan women lived in abject conditions, but then so did Afghan men, one in three people quite literally at risk of starvation. Bombing villages that were scrounging around for an existence unleashed new heights of mayhem and carnage; but the narrative of the war did not include that aspect.

The US-Nato coalition and the taxpayers who were funding the neo-imperial excursion wanted to hear about the `good` that was being done in Afghanistan. So front-page stories in widely read newspapers were devoted to `honour` killings and Western plans to eliminate them, to the girls` schools that were located on the outskirts of bombed-out shells of villages, and to the `new` Afghan woman who had been employed by the Americans or this or that NGO, and who was now an independent woman.

The trickis an old one. Long before the Americans got to it, it was the British who were resorting to `save the brown woman` slogans in order to justify their own colonial presence. At the time, only those Indian women who supported the British Empire were included in the plans and sometimes they too were left out. In the early 1900s, a conference was held in London on the topic of how best to empower Indian women. An Indian activist put it well: `To have a conference about us without us and decide what we need is ridiculous; we don`t need British women to empower us, we can manage quitewell without them.

Afghan women could not retort this way. They were already living in a `hellscape`, a creation of the Taliban`s misogynistic proclivities, of public whippings, of executions, of house-to-house searches and so much else that was part and parcel of the militant group`s desire to control and intimidate. Some did protest the invasion, begged again and again for peace, for no air strikes, no invasion, no occupation but their voices were drowned out,in some cases by the many wealthy Afghan expatri-ates who stood to gain from the invasion and the aid money that was attached to it.

Trickle-down feminism, devised as it was by fervent white middle-class feminists-turned-warmongers, did not work. For the 20 years of the US-Nato presence, an aid economy emerged in Kabul and in some of the other provincial capitals. The Afghan women who found jobs attached to the US presence, and in particular those women who worked in the Green Zone, found themselves living some modicum of `free` lives where freedom meant not wearing the burqa and kowtowing to the neo-colonial masters who funded their paychecks. In this small sense, the `liberation` was a success.

In all other senses, it was a failure and evidence of that is visible in just how readily the structures constructed by the invaders collapsed. Without aid the economy will now shrink and thousands of Afghan women will be pushed out of it even if the Taliban do allow women to work. In the rural areas, women will still face the prospect of more air strikes, dead husbands and sons and the questionof how they will survive.

What was required in Afghanistan was cultural transformation and grassroots change. This did not happen because in connecting women`s empowerment to foreign occupation, drones and bombs, the entire idea of it was delegitimised to such an extent that any talk of women`s freedom was and is considered to be a collaboration with the empire and its nefarious doings. This last bit is crucial because it represents the gargantuan task that faces the Afghan women in developing an indigenous conversation around empowerment that can legitimise the idea once again. In the current climate of uncertainty and constraint, this seems nearly impossible to achieve.

In any case, in the near term, Afghan women need the basics required for survival. Those whose husbands, fathers, brothers etc have been killed, and there are thousands and thousands of them, need help just to live. Those who are internally displaced or are refugees headed to Pakistan or Iran or elsewhere require humanitarian assistance. The need is urgent and the time is dire because the twin catastrophes of the Tahban takeover and the hovering Delta variant-fuelled Covid-19 surge does not bode well for their future.

The US-Nato experiment to transform Afghan women into rough imitations of middle-class women in the white and Western world failed. The consequences of it will be borne by Afghan women, who never provided permission for an invasion in their name but who will nevertheless pay the price for it. The incoming Taliban government, despite its efforts to seem kindly and accommodating, is likely to be as retrogressive and repressive as ever.

The hope lies in the possibility of Afghan women, particularly those who are educated, in devising a locally relevant plan for their own welfare and empowerment. This will take time, quite likely a very long time and one can only hope and pray that they are able to survive until it comes. The writer is an attorney teaching constitutional law and political philosophy.

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