Women and Reconciliation (4): A Response to Anatol Lieven’s Afghan Books Review

Author: Sari Kouvo

Published: 3 February 2012
Downloaded: 25 September 2018
Download URL: https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/wp-admin/post.php

Never propose a political system or solution for anybody that you could not live with yourself, not even for women. AAN's Sari Kouvo comments on Anatol Lieven's review 'Afghanistan: The Best Way to Peace' in the February 2012 issue of the New York Review of Books and notes that Lieven’s ‘best way’ for women is not one she would accept.

Anatol Lieven’s review of nine books on Afghanistan is interesting and in parts a pleasant read (read it here). Lieven's work merits a comprehensive analysis, but I will here only deal with the three last paragraphs where he addresses the faith of Afghan women in the reconciliation process. Lieven writes:

‘Finally, what of the fate of the social progress made since 2001, especially with respect to women’s rights? Jonathan Steele gives a powerful answer to the question. * The melancholy truth is that the Taliban are no more reactionary in this regard than most of Afghan rural society. As the briefest glance at media coverage of Afghanistan in recent years makes clear, the limited gains for women’s rights have been made only under intense Western pressure and in the face of apparent strong resistance from our own Afghan political and military allies. Where the Taliban were different—and attracted international opprobrium—was not in their basic
culture, but in the way they codified the suppression of women in state law rather than leaving it to local and family custom. Moreover, they extended this suppression to the cities where women had made real though precarious progress over the course of the twentieth century. The task of the US and its allies therefore must be to preserve the cities at least as areas where women can continue to enjoy more rights and opportunities in the hope that a new culture will gradually spread from them to the countryside.

This is a depressing prospect when compared with the hopes that followed the overthrow of the Taliban ten years ago. But let us face facts. Our societies and official establishments have demonstrated beyond any possible doubt that they lack the stamina and capacity for sacrifice necessary to remain in Afghanistan for the decades that would be necessary to transform the position of Afghan women as a whole; and there is nothing ethical or responsible about setting goals from the safety of London or Washington that informed people know cannot in fact be reached.

I chose to respond to Lieven not because his opinions are particularly extreme. Rather the contrary, Lieven puts in writing opinions that I have heard expressed several times over the past few years. Lieven jumps on the bandwagon of those arguing ‘we tried, but failed’ or worse ‘we did our best, but Afghan women aren’t ready’. This is a very top-down approach that views Afghan women as passive victims who need saving or who cannot be saved and about whom policy decisions need to be made, instead of viewing women as actors in their right. It is an approach that provides easy excuses for the international community and that hides the everyday struggle for change done my Afghan women at every level of their society.

Where Lieven is more unique though is that he does not even attempt to refer to any research or analysis written by women, or that extensively focuses on Afghan women’s situation. Usually at least some gesture is given to the actual work of women before making statements or decisions on their behalf. Over the last two weeks in Kabul, I have had the opportunity to try out Lieven’s thesis on a few of the urban, women’s activists – the women who would fare reasonably well in Lieven’s scenario. The responses varied from stunned silence, a few dry tears of frustration and angry rants. The mildest responses emphasized that governments cannot just be allowed to change their policies; that they have to keep the pressure up, even if they do not keep up the funding. A more angry and vocal response was calling Lieven’s thesis ‘racist’, emphasizing that he would not accept what he is proposing for himself, so ‘why does he allow himself to suggest it for me?’ A more exasperated response was: ‘We have enough people to fight in this country, do we now also have to fight professors in London?’

While changing the lives of Afghan women held considerable symbolic importance at the time of the US intervention in Afghanistan and the years immediately thereafter. The ‘saving’ of Afghan women showed to be a precarious affair. As Lieven correctly points out repressive attitudes and behavior towards women were not unique to the Taleban; discrimination and violence against women exists all over Afghanistan. Lack of education, poverty, conflict-related
trauma, hostility towards what is perceived as ‘new’ or ‘foreign’ ideas and the power of an increasingly conservative clergy (the religious backlash to what was perceived as the anti-religious Soviet invasion) has created a context where promoting equality or rights of woman and other marginalized groups is difficult and slow. Lieven is then right that the effort to promote women’s rights face strong resistance from Afghan political and military actors. However, I strongly disagree with Lieven’s opinion that the ‘gains for women’s rights’ have been made ‘only under intense Western pressure’. The US and other Western governments have helped push for important legal changes, but to the extent these legal changes have had an impact on Afghan women’s lives it has been due to the stubborn, everyday struggles of Afghan women – and men. For example, the much talked about Constitutional quota for women in the parliament has ensured a sizable representation of women in the parliament, but it is the women – and some of the men – who actually made it to the parliament (with whatever means they did so) that are debating and strategizing for (and also against) women’s rights. Their strategies are not always pretty, but they are making politics in their society. Similarly, the drafting and adoption of the Law on the Elimination of Violence against Women was internationally supported, but Afghan women’s rights activists played a key role in drafting it, it is their work that influences how the law is interpreted and implemented and it is they who on a daily basis work with Afghan institutions to create solutions for the women who are trying to escape situations of extreme violence. The fact that what seems to be an increasing number of Afghan women today escape from situations of extreme violence, some through suicide, some through leaving their homes and some through speaking out in the media, is another example of resistance and agency. These women are not passive victims waiting to be saved, they know that they are unlikely to be saved and they are dealing with it.

In fact, the ‘West’ too easily congratulates itself for changes in women’s rights that have occurred in Afghanistan over the past ten years, as it (excuse my generalization!) is not interested in the complicated detail about women’s situation in Afghanistan. As noted above discrimination and violence against women exists all over Afghanistan, and this is not only discrimination and violence by men against women, but also by women against women. However, all over Afghanistan one can also find the alternative: In all ethnic groups, and in both rural and urban communities, there are individuals, families and communities that manage to do things differently: that do everything in their power to ensure that girls and women are educated and socially or politically active; that wait to marry their daughters and only marry them with insurances that they can continue to study, work and enjoy the freedoms they enjoyed at home (sometimes it does not work); that do not accept violence against women and who recognize that families and societies change when women are empowered. The last point is of course particularly important in a culture where women have such great responsibility for – and power over – children and their early education.

It is then not up to the ‘US and its allies’ to ‘preserve the cities as areas where women can continue to enjoy more rights’ in the hope that this spills over to the country side. Rather, it is for the US and its allies to continue to defend the legal changes that have been made over the past decade and that provide a basis for Afghan women’s struggle, and to educate their own
civilians and military that if they talk only to men, they miss the realities of half of Afghanistan and they actually make it more difficult for Afghan women to influence development and conflict-resolution in their communities and country. I do of course know that much is already being done, by civilians and also by the military, including through female only outreach teams, but I am not equally convinced that those listening are always learning, or that what they learn is actually feeding into policy decisions.

I do agree with Lieven that the prospects he is proposing for Afghan women are ‘depressing’, I would also agree with him that ‘our official establishments’ lack the capacity to change the situation of Afghan women. However, I disagree strongly that the solution therefore is to divide Afghanistan into urban zones where women enjoy some rights and protection and to accept extreme discrimination and violence elsewhere. The role of ‘our official establishments’ is to keep the pressure up, based on the international agreements to which they themselves and the Afghan government are the parties and to speak with and listen to all segments of Afghan society (also women), this they have actually also agreed to in the UN Security Council resolution 1325 (2001) on women, peace and security. If this is done, it can help support the fragile advances made by Afghan women inside their homes and rights’ advocates in Afghan society, it might also help their own policies through creating something resembling consistency.

* This is a reference to 'Ghosts of Afghanistan: Hard Truths and Foreign Myths' by Jonathan Steele (Counterpoint)