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Will Afghan women be the Taliban's spoils of war?

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Sustainable peace invariably builds on improving the living conditions and perspectives of the majority of the population. Thus, the work undertaken by the international community in Afghanistan simply cannot afford to neglect, ignore, or exclude the women. Let us be clear. This is a matter of geopolitics, not just of women's liberation.

In any society, women are natural stabilizers owing to their roles in families and communities – even more so in conflict or post-conflict societies. They not only constitute more than 50 percent of the population but also educate 100 percent of the children, girls and boys alike. It is the women who largely transmit role models. They are indispensable security agents in their respective societies.

The situation of women both in Afghanistan and in Pakistan is particularly precarious. After decades of war and violence, the women there have to cope with the lack of everything in daily life – from health services to education, from personal freedom to political participation. Now they will have to cope with more dire perspectives altogether as their future might serve as a "trade off" in a deal with the Taliban.

Since the London conference has opened the path for negotiations with the "moderate" Taliban, any deal between Western powers and local rulers will also define the fate of women in the region. Is there such a thing as "moderate" Taliban from a woman's perspective? A year ago, in Pakistan's Swat valley, the world caught a glimpse of the Taliban's concept of the place of women in society. Although they had bombed and blown up more than a hundred girls' schools, eliminated women from public life, and re-introduced stoning and other inhuman practices under the Sharia, the so-called "moderate" Taliban of the Swat valley managed to strike a deal with the weak central government, leaving them in total control of the region.

It took a powerful woman, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, to raise international awareness. Islamabad then changed course. What followed was the military intervention by the Pakistani government in the Swat valley and beyond. However, much remains obscure and at best ambiguous for the future outlook. Recent offers by the Pakistani government to help the West in their efforts with the Afghan Taliban need careful scrutiny with regard to their female dimension.

Afghan women face, basically, two alternatives: de facto slavery according to the stone-age concept of society promoted by the Taliban or full participation in re-building their country according to modern standards. Westerners are not simply onlookers. It will be up to NATO and UN power brokers to determine the terms of any agreement with the Taliban. If they were they to abandon the Afghan women, they would betray the very values that made them send soldiers and

development experts to the country. Hillary Clinton will have a decisive say in judging any arrangement with “moderate” Taliban from a foreign policy point of view. Her personal track record on women’s issues is a reason for hope. Nevertheless, it is easy to imagine that she will come under heavy pressure from those eager for any patched-up exit strategy.

Now is the time to develop a farsighted strategy for Afghanistan’s women. The military know how crucial it is to win over the women in any post-conflict society. The Pentagon recently started to employ Afghan women in producing certain types of army equipment such as T-shirts and blankets. During the last years, numerous civil society projects involving women in health care, education, rule of law, and access to political participation were generated. The international community could learn a lot from such civil society initiatives, many of them sponsored by NGOs.

President Hamid Karzai should be seen credibly leading an unequivocal pro-women’s policy. So far he has played an ambivalent game. The Afghan president and parliament should be motivated to guarantee women’s rights and give them high public profile. Now is the time for the West to visibly establish a red line on this.

Women should not be the spoils of war anywhere in the 21st century. The Muslim world will attentively observe how the issue of women is handled in Pakistan and Afghanistan. The United Nations, NATO, the EU and all politicians involved cannot afford to get this wrong. They must make sure that Afghan women finally get the opportunity to contribute as full and equal partners in the re-building of their society, an opportunity so far sadly denied to them by their own men.