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Coming of Age in the Land of Broken Dreams. Women's Rights in Afghanistan under US Military Occupation

By Dana Visalli

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Teaching at a private girl's school in Afghanistan, as I am doing at the moment, brings home to the heart and mind the harsh realities that Afghan women live with. In a series of essays that the fifteen and sixteen year old students at the school recently wrote, one encounters proverbs shared among Afghan women such as, 'When sisters sit together, they always praise their brothers; when brothers sit together, they sell their sisters to others.' Another is, 'The good girl is the one who goes to her husband's house with a white dress and comes out in a white shroud.'

While the abusive treatment of fully half of the population of Afghanistan may seem like a pathology unique to this country or region, one only need to read Nicholas Kristoff and Cheryl Dunn's book *Half the Sky* to realize the perverse behavior of males in relation to females is commonplace around the world. When one fully grasps the vast extent of this dysfunctional behavior, it becomes clear that what all humans need to do is take their next step towards a sane existence.

The young women at this school intend to change their country; but it won't be an easy task. The impoverished population is growing rapidly and the land is degraded. Afghanistan has little in the way of energy resources and the global production of petroleum appears to be peaking. This is not a propitious coincidence of events. As one student writes, 'My father

always tells me that to reach our dreams and goals we have to tolerate and endure so many challenges that are directed to us. That is true because we can't reach our big dreams easily.'

Passages in their essays illuminate the antediluvian social mindset they are confronted with. 'Some people in Afghanistan think that girls should not go to school, because girls are for working at home not working outside of the home. In many places in Afghanistan, if a girl talks to man or boy who is not her relative, people think that she is a bad girl. People say "good" girls should always be quiet and listen to their grandparents, parents and older brothers.' Another writes, 'For girls, growing up in Afghanistan is sometime like being in a jail. In provinces like Kandahar, where I am from, many parents believe that a girl should not get an education but only stay in the house learning to cook and clean.' Somehow these particular girls have managed to make it to school. 'Studying and learning are very important for me. Without that there can be no life. Education is like sunshine....' The light in these girls' eyes, minds and spirits is profound; youthful spirits somehow expect a livable world.

Although the United States has occupied Afghanistan for twelve years now and spent \$750 billion dollars¹ on the war effort, many Afghans feel that life remains almost intolerable. 20 million of the country's 30 million people are impoverished, violence against women is endemic, and the Afghan government, supported by the U.S. military, is considered one of the most corrupt in the world.²

Afghan activist Malalai Joya writes, 'Afghan women had more rights in the 1960s to 1980s than today.

Rapes, abductions, murders, violence, forced marriages, and violence are increasing at an alarming rate never seen before in our history. Women commit self-immolation to escape their miseries. The production of opium and heroin has increased 4000 % since the U.S. invasion, making Afghanistan the narcotic drug capital of the world. Every aspect of life in Afghanistan today is tragic, and I don't know what to mention first.'³

The American record for making the world safer for girls and for children in general through warfare is not good. One could begin the accounting anywhere, but taking the Korean War as a starting point, the United States completely destroyed the social infrastructure of North Korea during that war, dropping 32,500 tons of napalm and another 600,000 tons of bombs on the cities, towns, villages, farms, dams, bridges and roads in that country.⁴ General Curtis LeMay pointed out in 1952, 'We have bombed every city twice, now we are going to pulverize them into stones.' That rain of destruction fell on the children of North Korea as well as the adults—children who had the same hopeful gleam in their eye as today's Afghan students. Two million North Koreans were killed in the war, along with half a million Chinese.

The United States moved on to drop seven million tons of bombs on the agrarian, rice-farming country of Vietnam, along with 400,000 tons of napalm and twenty million gallons of chemical herbicide, which was sprayed on one of the richest tropical ecosystems on the planet.⁴ The Air Force had a motto: 'Only you can prevent forests,' which they thought was quite funny, while in fact the spraying was an act of ecocide. At the same time a massive, nine-year, covert B-52 bombing campaign was waged against two more impoverished, rice-farming societies in

Cambodia and Laos. This insane rain of destruction was dropped randomly on forests and fields and villages; there were no military targets in these countries, although there were a lot of children under the bombs. Cambodian society has never recovered. It was so shattered and traumatized by nine years of airborne brutality that the bombing was followed by the rise of Khmer Rouge, who hated all things Western. Social customs were obliterated, and today Cambodia is the largest sex-trafficking society in the world, selling children as young as five years old into sexual slavery.⁵

The United States attacked and invaded Iraq in 1990 and again in 2003, imposing crippling sanctions between those two wars which destroyed the economy of the Iraqi people and killed an estimated 750,000 children.⁶ That society is now a mere disfigured and violent shadow of the relatively prosperous and liberal state that existed in the 1970s.⁷ Serbia was bombed for three months in 1999, followed by Afghanistan in 2001, and Libya in 2012 (Libya is now a 'failed state,' destroyed by the bombing campaign⁸). Today we supply weapons to the Islamists fighting in Syria, where after three years of civil there are six million Syrian refugees.⁹ It is this kind of psychotic behavior that moved Martin Luther King to say in 1967, 'The greatest purveyor of violence in the world today is my own government.'

Human beings are genetically programmed perceive the world from a self-centered perspective, and thus to interpret the unfolding events of life in their own favor.¹⁰ For Americans this distortion caused by the power of the self-image results in the perception of the last 70 years of endless warfare against other human societies and against the biological integrity of the earth as 'freedom and democracy.' Observing this psychological distortion of reality, Vietnam veteran Mike Hastie says, 'America is in absolute psychiatric denial of its genocidal, maniacal nature. We kill and destroy for profit.' The United States spends one trillion dollars a year on its military colossus, while the problems of the world are environmental, ecological and psychological, against which bullets and bombs are useless at best.¹¹

So just who is it that is coming of age in the land of broken dreams? It is the American people, who will soon be waking up the reality of the crimes against people and the planet committed by their government, in their name and with their resources. Whenever we are ready, each one of us can take 'one small step for man,' one giant leap for humanity, by disowning and disarming the bombs, and thereafter doing our utmost to make the world safe for children and other living things.

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Notes

1. Extrapolated through 2014 from: <https://csis.org/publication/us-cost-afghan-war-fy2002-fy2013>

also: <http://www.globalresearch.ca/us-wars-in-afghanistan-iraq-to-cost-6-trillion/5350789> The decade-long American wars in Afghanistan and Iraq will end up costing as much as \$6 trillion calculates the Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government

2. Corruption: <http://www.transparency.org/country#AFG>
3. Malalai Joya : <http://www.malalaijoya.com/dcmj/joya-in-media/304-afghan-womens-leader-joya-brings-anti-war-message-to-vancouver.html>
4. Bombing Civilians, An American Tradition: <http://hnn.us/articles/67717.html>
5. Sexual slavery in Cambodia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Human_trafficking_in_Cambodia
6. 750,000 Iraqi children killed by sanctions:
http://www.brussellstribunal.org/article_view.asp?id=643
7. 4% of Iraq population killed by wars and sanctions: <http://www.juancole.com/2013/10/american-population-sanctions.html>

8. Libya a failed state: <http://gulfnnews.com/opinions/columnists/the-road-ahead-for-libya-the-making-of-a-failed-state-1.1295737>

9. 2 million external and 4 million internal Syrian refugees:
<http://gulfnnews.com/opinions/columnists/the-road-ahead-for-libya-the-making-of-a-failed-state-1.1295737>

10. Back to Sanity: Healing the Madness of our Minds by Steve Taylor:
http://www.amazon.com/Back-To-Sanity-Healing-Madness/dp/1848505477/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1394555328&sr=8-1&keywords=back+to+sanity

11. One trillion dollars a year military budget: <http://antiwar.com/blog/2012/02/20/the-real-us-military-budget-1-trillion/>