Why Gender Matters in Understanding September 11: Women, Militarism, and Violence

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Ever since the Taliban claimed victory and sovereignty over Afghanistan in 1997, it has waged war against Afghan women. The Taliban's radical fundamentalist form of *sharia*, Islamic rule, banned women's education, activism, and even physical presence in Afghan society. Women have been beaten and put to death for violating these rules. Under a system of legalized hatred for women, women are subject to increasing, so-called "private" forms of violence, including rape and domestic violence, with little recourse (Human Rights Watch 2001). Arab and other Muslim feminists in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Malaysia, India, and Turkey have publically criticized and taken organized action against the Taliban's and others' use of religion and state power to repress women (Afkhami 1995; see websites for the Revolutionary Association of Women in Afghanistan's and Women Living Under Muslim Law). In the United States, the Feminist Majority and other women's advocates have repeatedly called attention to the Taliban's anti-women activities.

Until recently, few Americans paid attention to the Taliban's actions. Men and women on the left and the right dismissed Taliban policies as culturally specific, or as an internal political situation in which the United States or the United Nations had no stake (in contrast, there was global uproar over the destruction of Buddhist statues by the Taliban; Pollitt 2001). In our ignorance of Islam, the Arab world, other Muslim societies, and Afghan society in particular, most Americans assumed that Afghan women never enjoyed independence or autonomy. In fact, there was an Afghan women's movement as early as the 1920s. By the 1970s, two decades before the Taliban, Afghan women benefited from relatively high levels of education and leadership in Afghanistan.

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Perhaps our collective neglect of the treatment of women in Afghanistan was a missed opportunity to foresee or even prevent the events of September 11, 2001. Societies that condone and even promote violence against women have shown over and over again that they tend to be violent in other ways as well. Even if we dismiss the claim that women's rights are central to human rights, there are centuries of evidence that physical, political, and economic violence against women is a harbinger of other forms of violence. Few societies that are plagued by it are otherwise peaceful.

The United States should pay particular attention to women when attempting to counteract terrorism and encourage more peaceful and democratic political systems in Afghanistan and throughout the world. In our foreign and domestic policies, we should look at both the victims and perpetrators of violence and terrorism. We should pay particularly close attention to the work of those who are effective opponents of violence against women. By doing so, we are more likely to address the root causes of terrorism and violence at home and in the wider world.

This paper analyzes women's roles as victims, supporters, and opponents of violence, terrorism, and militarism and proposes policy recommendations from its findings. It outlines important links between economic development, violence, women's activism, and peace-building efforts. Economic instability, combined with patriarchal views of women's roles, breeds conditions that lead to violence against women and undermine their capacity to build peaceful societies. In turn, violence against women heightens economic instability—as a result it sows the seeds of other forms of violence committed worldwide by men. In reaction, women sometimes resort to violence themselves,

although more often they become activists for peace. Understanding why and when women fight for peace—and including them in peace building efforts—is crucial to guaranteeing higher levels of peace and security throughout the world.

Women as Victims of Militarism and Violence

"What has happened to us—our properties have been damaged, our bodies have been damaged. Everything—our life has absolutely changed. . . The spirit has been damaged."
                    Mozambican woman and victim of civil war
                    (quoted in Turshen 2001, 60)

Where institutionalized violence and terrorism exist, women are often singled out as targets. Like men, they are victims, innocent bystanders, loved ones of victims, or refugees displaced by war. Because men are more likely to be involved in violence as soldiers and militants, women are more often displaced by their absence. The U.N. Human Rights Commission reports that two thirds of all people who have been turned into refugees in recent years have been women and their dependent children. Women are also targeted directly through deliberate murder, rape, and injury. In Christian, Muslim, and Buddhist societies, especially in modern ethnic and religious conflicts, male fighters have used rape to impregnate "enemy" women as a form of genocide. Terrorists' sperm "dirties" an ethnic line, and raped women may be rejected by their own societies. Such rape tactics are also designed to demoralize enemy men (Stiglmayer 1994; Turshen 2001). The recent genocidal movements in the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda saw rape used as a method of terror on a grand scale (Human Rights Watch 1996; Stiglmayer 1994).

Even in relatively peaceful societies like the United States, women are targets of violent acts such as rape and domestic violence. Elected officials, judges, and public policies in many states ignore or dismiss the right to freedom from violence as impractically complicated to enforce. Such acts of violence are often treated as private matters with little public consequence. But this purportedly "private" form of violence has important political ramifications. It stops women from being involved in their communities, and it reinforces the notion that they are second-class citizens (Caiazza 2001; Caiazza and Hartmann 2001; Enloe 1993; Sapiro 1993). This kind of violence is a form of daily terrorism against women as a class of citizens (Fineman and Mykitiuk 1994).

Whenever women are the victims of violence that goes unaddressed socially or politically, their victimization indicates

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that violence is an official, popular, and acceptable strategy for achieving political, social, or economic power. Violence is self-perpetuating: sons watch and do; daughters watch and submit and often do. In the United States, neglected and abused children are nearly twice as likely to commit crimes and be arrested as are other children (Harvard School of Public Health, Division of Public Health Practice, Violence Prevention Programs 2001). Similarly, men who beat, rape, or kill women are likely to be violent in other areas of their lives. They are likely to abuse children and to use violence to achieve a variety of goals in addition to subordinating women, such as achieving political power (Friedman 1994). Simply stated, violence against women and other forms of violence are inextricably linked.

In addition, where violence against women is particularly endemic or ignored, women are often less able to care for their families, thanks to their increased physical and, often, economic insecurity. This, in turn, contributes to insecurity and instability in society as a whole (Friedman 1994). Where violence of any sort is an acceptable strategy for achieving power, societal instability only encourages its further use.

Finally, even without considering violence per se, "non-violent" forms of repressing women's rights also contribute to a country's economic and political instability. Across the globe, when women have more rights and equality, national standards of living also rise— life expectancy is higher, incomes and education levels are higher, and birthrates are lower. As countries more fully include women in political, economic, and social rights, standards of living improve as well (Crossette 2001). A country with little violence, but relatively few opportunities for gender equality, is unlikely to achieve high levels of economic and political development.

Women as Terrorists and Supporters of Militarism

"Violence is the only way to answer violence!"
            Gudrun Ensslin, female leader of Germany's 1970s
            Baader-Meinhof Gang
            (quoted in Huffman 1999)

Women are not only passive victims of terrorism and violence. Some women, although a relatively small number, participate in or encourage terrorism. Women have committed acts of terrorism, including suicide bombings, in India, Palestine, and other countries. In one of the few cases when a world leader was killed during an act of terrorism, a woman assassinated India's Rajiv Gandhi in

1991. In Norway, a right-wing group has a "women's wing" of terrorists (Fangen 1997). In the United States, there has been a deliberate policy by the KKK's male leadership to recruit women as racist activists (Blee 1992).

But it is men who comprise the overwhelming majority of individuals who practice terrorism. In part, this is because of sexist and patriarchal norms that preclude women from militaristic action and limit their public or activist roles. Since many terrorist groups are rooted in diverse religious fundamentalist or right-wing ideologies, their male leaders often refuse to let women assume men's traditional roles as soldiers, terrorists, martyrs, or so-called freedom fighters. Their terrorist actions are often justified as defending a social order that is dependent on women's "purity" and requires the exclusion of women from many facets of public life.

Some women take part in terrorism when there are few perceived outlets for gender equality. Frustrated with a lack of outlets for their public activism, women turn to the kinds of strategies that many alienated groups have adopted: to fight against mainstream political institutions using extreme tactics (Fangen 1997).

When not playing the role of terrorists directly, some women support men's militancy in their traditional roles as mothers by nurturing families committed to militarist or terrorist causes (Ibanez 2001). In many societies, women have been traditionally charged with passing on the cultural norms and expectations of their communities to sons and daughters. When those norms include the use of violence for political ends, women encourage the radicalism and militaristic self-sacrifice that lead to terrorist acts. Notably, women's roles perpetuating these values are not unique to non-governmental terrorist groups: the values of "feminine sacrifice," in which mothers give their sons to militarist causes, are promoted by many military policymakers who would loathe being compared with terrorists (Enloe 2000a).

Women's support for militarism has been a resource that sustains both terrorist and formal military conflict. Such support can bring moral weight to militarist movements and encourage involvement in them. In some cases, women are moved to provide active logistical support for militarism and terrorism (i.e., by feeding and clothing militants, delivering messages, and providing other resources). Women have played all these roles prominently in recent decades in areas as diverse as El Salvador, Nicaragua, Northern Ireland, Palestine, and Israel (see Hammami 1997; Sharoni 1997 and 2001).

For many women, participating in and supporting (though rarely planning) acts of terrorism are ways to "protect" their families, homes, and communities. As mothers and wives, many women accept their traditional roles as protectors of their husbands' and children's well-being. In times and places of violent conflict, political disjuncture, and economic insecurity, women may feel unable to do so. *When women live in oppressed or alienated communities, they may also have few formal ways to work for political change. Being allowed inside small, elected, secret terrorist organizations may allow some women to see themselves as fighting for the promise of a more just and stable way of life* (Hammami 1997; Ibanez 2001).

Men's support of and participation in terrorist or militarist activities can also stem from a desire to bring about justice in the face of economic or political insecurity. However, their goals and aspirations are justified more often by the rhetoric of building a society based on religious or political ideals than in explicitly protecting or bettering the lives of their children and families. These "private" concerns are considered women's realm. And, because of traditional gender roles, women approach these concerns through different activities than men.

Women as Peacemakers

"[We should] cease to be silent. . . protest against those who bear the responsibility for this cursed war ... [and not] relinquish the struggle until our sons come home."
Shoshana Shmueli, founder of the Israeli Parents against Silence
(quoted in Sharoni 1997, 152)

Not all women who react to terrorism or militarism support it. In many cases, women respond by becoming activists for peace. Again, they often do so because they accept their traditional responsibilities for guaranteeing their families' private social, economic, and physical well-being, but feel unable to fulfill them. They are moved to fight the circumstances, including conditions of violence, causing their uncertainty. They hope to build a society that will allow them to ensure their families' safety. In the Middle East, Latin America, and Northern Ireland, for example, women have fought state-sponsored and non-state-sponsored terrorism through their activism (Aretxaga 1997; Fisher 1989; Sharoni 1997). Their efforts are not based on an inherently "feminine" predisposition toward peace but result from their desire to fulfill their traditional responsibilities as mothers and wives.

In many cases, women act on behalf of peace because they moved from wanting to protect only their own families to protecting all children. At some point, they recognize that

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to address their own political and economic insecurity, they need to address a larger set of conditions facing their communities (Fisher 1989). In Russia, Israel, Serbia, Italy, and Spain, mothers have come together to protest militarism precisely because they first felt a need to protect their children. They have resorted to protests and other highly visible and disruptive tactics in the absence of democratic mechanisms for change. In part, because they have the moral weight of motherhood behind them, they have, at times, been very effective (Caiazza forthcoming).

Many women's peace movements demand greater accountability and more responsiveness from their governments and other institutions. They become activists for democracy. Because their activism is often rooted in their family roles, when women activists are included in building a country's democratic systems and civil society, they are also more likely to prioritize policies that focus on building the well-being of families and overall systems of social welfare. This, in turn, can lead to more economic stability and political security.

Policy Recommendations: Counteracting Terrorism by Addressing Women's Concerns

Throughout the world, violence and radicalism are associated with political and economic disjuncture, alienation, and dysfunction. Men and women who become terrorists do so because they see few alternatives for pursuing political change. They are frustrated by their economic and political insecurity. They have little trust in government or other institutions. As a result, they turn to movements that promise them justice, power, and access to resources. These movements are often rooted in a desire to return to a more conservative culture and win greater independence from Western hegemony. In many cases, they are based on extremist right- or left-wing ideas. The men and women involved in them see violence as a justified, or even the only, way to achieve their goals. These conditions politicize both men and women—both in support of and against militarism.

For women, radicalism often stems from a desire to protect their homes and communities in times of economic and political insecurity. They turn to political movements that promise safety, better living conditions, and broader economic opportunities, as well as political or religious justice.

These conclusions point to a set of policy implications that the United States and other industrialized democracies should heed if they hope to encourage democracy

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throughout the world. These recommendations encompass a long-term strategy for developing women's rights as a tool for building global peace and security.

- **U.S. international policy should unequivocally oppose violence against women and regimes that condone it. Efforts to combat it should be as central to our evaluations of democracy as competitive elections and universal suffrage.**

While direct and indirect violence against women exists in virtually every country, we should not ignore it as incidental to other forms of violence. In most countries marked by political violence, violence against women is particularly rampant. Often, political institutions in those countries treat women as second-class citizens by denying them the right to participate fully in all aspects of society. They officially or unofficially encourage violence against them. U.S. policy should use every available economic and diplomatic means to vigorously oppose these regimes.

As part of its program to fight violence against women, U.S. policy should provide women with the resources that allow them to escape violent situations and achieve individual autonomy. Such efforts can include providing educational and health care assistance to women, through legislation and policies like the Afghan Women and Children Relief Act of 2001, introduced in the U.S. Congress in November of 2001. This legislation would provide such assistance through local institutions and nongovernmental organizations, particularly women's organizations, as much as possible (Feminist Majority 2001).

Turning a blind eye to violence against women—at home and abroad—also needs to be publicly recognized as a sign that violence is an acceptable part of a society that undermines a country's stability. The seeds of terrorism are sown in violence against women and the repression of women's rights.

- **Women need to be included as equal partners in implementing political and economic development. U.S. foreign policy should make women's involvement in democratization central to its international aid programs.**

Women's concerns need to be taken seriously and incorporated into development policies. As the United States and other countries pursue policies encouraging development, they should make including indigenous women's voices a top priority, not an afterthought.

Incorporating women into development efforts offers many positive outcomes in addition to improving women's status. Because of women's central roles in caring for their families, and women activists' resulting focus on social welfare, including women's perspectives can also encourage more stability, growth, and well-being. Empowering women to take part in political processes can be a successful way to encourage democracy and stability (Enloe 2000b).

Policies requiring women's participation in nation- and peace-building would mandate that any government established in Afghanistan with U.S. assistance respect and guarantee women's rights; design reconstruction programs to give women and girls access to health care, education, and other social welfare resources; and distribute humanitarian assistance equitably. These policies should be central to U.S. development programs worldwide.

- **As counter-movements to terrorism, women's peace movements should be especially encouraged and targeted for financial aid under U.S. foreign policies. They should also be specifically incorporated into reconstruction efforts supported by the United States.**

Women's peace movements have been effective agents of change in many settings where terrorism and military conflict are rampant. They draw attention to the consequences of militarism on a community's families, and they bring moral weight to arguments for peace. In many settings, they could provide the basis for large-scale efforts to counter terrorist organizations. But, as currently constituted, these movements are usually small and have few resources to mobilize women and demand attention from terrorist organizations or governments. More investment in these movements by U.S. international aid efforts would encourage peace around the world.

Because women's peace movements have been so effective, and because of women's clear stake in peacemaking processes, in October of 2001 the U.N Security Council adopted a resolution (#1325) formally calling on peace officials in the United Nations, NATO, and other official organizations to explicitly include women in negotiations for ceasefires and post-war reconstruction. The United States should wholeheartedly support this recommendation in the implementation of both international and U.S. peace and development programs. In some of its programs—including its grants to grassroots women's and refugees organizations in Afghanistan and Pakistan starting in 1997—it has already done so. These efforts should be widened and continued.

- **In the long term, U.S. foreign policy and international organizations should place a higher priority on programs to encourage economic and political development, especially in the most authoritarian and impoverished countries. These programs are among the most likely to increase levels of security among men and women and address the conditions that encourage terrorism.**

Economic and political development efforts can diminish many of the national and international hatreds that currently plague the world. They can create more obvious opportunities for men and women to promote change through less violent means and to achieve economic success. Perhaps most importantly, they can also make it easier for women and men to protect their families—economically, politically, and physically. As a result, they can alleviate some of the pressures that inspire men and women to take up arms and/or engage in terrorist activity.

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In combating terrorism, the United States and other governments should rely on more than traditional intelligence and counter-terrorism strategies. Overall, total spending on U.S. foreign economic aid is currently about three times spending on military aid. But in the tense and highly militarized countries of the Middle East, U.S. military aid outstrips economic aid by about 50 percent (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census 2000). We should spend at least equal efforts and resources encouraging effective economic development around the world, especially in this region. Investing more in economic aid, especially in the Middle East, could partially counterbalance our image as a country that funds violence by supplying military arms, it would also address some of the root causes of terrorism.

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- FEMINIST MAJORITY'S CAMPAIGN TO STOP GENDER APARTHEID IN AFGHANISTAN: www.HelpAfghanWomen.com
- HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH: www.hrw.org
- REVOLUTIONARY ASSOCIATION OF THE WOMEN OF AFGHANISTAN: www.rawa.org
- UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION: www.unhrc.ch
- WOMEN LIVING UNDER MUSLIM LAWS: www.wluml.org

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