

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind



July 11, 2016

Concern over Women's Rights

To support Afghan women, Laura Bush, a former American first lady, has called for a continued military presence in the male-dominated areas. In an interview with a media outlet on the sidelines of the Aspen Ideas Festival, she remarked withdrawing US troops from Afghanistan as "we would have to start all over again" in Afghanistan. Women would lose the ground they have gained since the 2001 US invasion of the country, she argued. "The Taliban had been there and we just had not paid any attention. The plight of the women there was a shock to American women."

In the post-Taliban Afghanistan, women played a significant role in social, political, cultural and educational aspects. They engaged in presidential and parliamentary campaigns with the establishment of a democratic country based on the Constitution. Despite feeling inferior and growing in a traditional structure and patriarchal society, mainly during the Taliban's regime, Afghan women transcended all the barriers which hampered their progress and curtailed their legal freedoms. They denied being tradition-bound and subject to patriarchal culture imposed on them and their past generations on the basis of their sex.

Some facts are indisputable. Afghan girls and women suffered greatly under traditional customs. Their role was restricted within the four walls and they were considered as a pariah, especially in remote areas where traditional mindsets held strong sway. They suffered physical and mental tortures in one way or another. For instance, when a girl denied living with a man of her parents' choice under the same roof, she was considered brazen and deserved to be punished in a severe way. After all, if she dared elope with a man of her own choice, she was deemed a disgrace for her family and would be stoned to death – such stories are no more outdated but repeated every once in a while in tribal belt. A girl was flagellated last year in a desert court and Rokhshana, a young girl, was stoned in Ghor province. Similarly, a girl named Aziz Gul was reportedly killed, about three weeks ago, by her family in Ghor province for eloping with a man of her choice – which prompted the civil society activists to raise their concern and said that the graph of violence had increased in Ghor. The activists added that the violators of women's rights are at large and alleged that the government neglected women's rights in that province. Hence, women are still left at the mercy of conservative customs.

In a radical attitude, women's rights are tailored by personal taste and then colored with a religious brush. In other words, religious extremists impose their own ideas on religion regarding women's rights and then practice upon their self-styled methods. Their interpretations are sheer stereotype. The Taliban and members of the self-proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) treat women out of bias, carnal desire and ignorance and their ill-mannered treatment has nothing to do with religion. Afghan women suffered seriously under the Taliban. Claiming to establish Islamic caliphate, the Taliban trampled upon the rights and dignity of women to a great extent. They were subject to men's desire and as malleable to their husbands as slaves to their masters. Taking part in social, cultural and political activities was taboo for women. In areas under their control, the Taliban issued edicts which forbade women from being educated; girls were forced to leave schools and colleges. Those who wished to leave their home to go shopping had to be accompanied by a male relative, and were required to wear the burqa. Those who appeared to disobey were publicly beaten.

In 2001, Laura Bush in a radio address condemned the Taliban's brutality to women. She still seeks to uphold the rights of Afghan women, at least by words. Her concerns reflected in her words are appreciable and have to be taken serious. For continuing their social and political activities, Afghan women need a secure and violent-free society.

Although there are still some barriers ahead of women's progress and their rights and freedoms are still at stake, the nascent democracy led to great changes. On the basis of the Constitution, which was approved in 2004, men and women are equal before the law and have the same rights and responsibilities. Constitutionally, discriminating women on the basis of her sex is not acceptable. Moreover, unlike the traditional customs, "crime is a personal act" and girls are not supposed to sacrifice their lives, such as being exchanged as blood-money, for a crime committed by their brothers (in tribal belt, it was rife that when a boy raped a girl, his sister had to marry a man of the victim's family). Additionally, desert court is forbidden based on article 27 which states, "No one shall be punished without the decision of an authoritative court taken in accordance with the provisions of the law, promulgated prior to commitment of the offense."

It is feared that with the withdrawal of US forces and escalation of militancy, the investments on women's rights and freedoms will be in vain. Furthermore, it should be noted that women will encounter more challenges if democracy declines. Therefore, the government has to uphold the democratic system not only through combating insurgency but also enforcing the law to protect women's rights.

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How to End Hunger

By Hilal Elver and
Jomo Kwame Sundaram

Last September, world leaders made a commitment to end hunger by 2030, as part of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It sounds like a massive undertaking. In fact, the world already produces enough food to feed everyone. So why does the problem persist?

Poverty and hunger are intimately connected, which is why the SDGs target elimination of both. For someone living at the World Bank's poverty line of \$1.90 per day, food would account for some 50-70% of income. The Bank estimates that almost four-fifths of the world's poor live in rural areas, though those areas account for less than half of the world's population. The obvious conclusion is that raising rural incomes sustainably is required to eradicate hunger.

That will not be easy. Most developing countries nowadays are burdened by high rates of unemployment and underemployment. And with current economic prospects bleak, especially given low commodity prices, and insistence on fiscal austerity continuing in most places, downward pressure on rural incomes is likely to worsen.

But even if countries do manage to achieve inclusive growth, it will not be enough to eliminate hunger by 2030. The only way to do that will be to implement well-designed social protection and scale up pro-poor investments.

According to the World Bank, one billion people in 146 low- and middle-income countries currently receive some form of social protection. Yet 870 million of those living in extreme poverty, mainly in rural areas, lack coverage.

Unsurprisingly, the greatest shortfalls are in low-income countries, where social protection covers less than one-tenth of the population, 47% of which lives in extreme poverty. In the lower-middle-income countries, social protection reaches about a quarter of those living in extreme poverty, leaving about a half-billion people without coverage. In the upper middle-income countries, about 45% of those living in extreme poverty receive social-welfare benefits.

This is clearly not good enough. Improved social protection can help to ensure adequate food consumption and enable recipients to invest in their own nutrition, health, and other productive capacities. As such investments sustainably raise incomes, they enable further increases in productive personal investments, thereby breaking the vicious cycle of poverty

and hunger.

Governments, too, have investments to make, in order to ensure that those who are currently mired in poverty reach the point where they can invest in themselves. An early big investment push would generate additional incomes sooner, reducing longer-term financing costs. Moreover, it would boost aggregate demand in a world economy that badly needs it. The world can afford the needed investment. According to estimates by the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), and the World Food Programme (WFP), it would cost the equivalent of 0.3% of the world's 2014 income. All that is needed is for wealthier countries to provide budgetary support and technical assistance to the low-income countries that need it. (Most middle-income countries can afford the needed financing themselves.)

It should not be difficult to generate the political will to provide the needed support, at least in theory. After all, it has been more than a half-century since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and its Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, which treats the material needs of all persons as a fundamental human right. A few years earlier, US President Franklin D. Roosevelt called "freedom from want" – which, presumably, includes freedom from hunger – one of four essential freedoms of which people "everywhere in the world" should be assured.

Now, with the adoption of the SDGs, governments everywhere are obliged to take responsibility for ending poverty and hunger, as well as for creating the conditions for ensuring that both are permanently overcome. The upcoming High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development presents an important opportunity to forge the path ahead, setting near- and medium-term priorities. Ending hunger and poverty in a sustainable way is morally right, politically beneficial, and economically feasible. For world leaders, inaction is no longer an option. (Courtesy Project Syndicate)

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Revisiting the Iraq War

By Richard N. Haass

Seven years, 12 volumes of evidence, findings, and conclusions, and one executive summary later, the Report of the Iraq Inquiry, more commonly referred to as the Chilcot Report (after its chairman, Sir John Chilcot), is available for one and all to read. Few people will get through all of it; the executive summary alone (well over 100 pages) is so long that it calls for its own executive summary.

But it would be a shame if the Report were not widely read and, more important, studied, because it contains some useful insights into how diplomacy operates, how policy is made, and how decisions are taken. It also reminds us of the centrality of the decision to invade Iraq in 2003, and of the aftermath, for understanding today's Middle East.

A central theme of the Report is that the Iraq War did not have to happen, and certainly not when it did. The decision to go to war was partly based on faulty intelligence. Iraq constituted at most a gathering threat, not an imminent one. Alternatives to using military force – above all, strengthening Turkey's and Jordan's lackluster enforcement of and support for the UN sanctions designed to pressure Saddam Hussein – were barely explored. Diplomacy was rushed.

Making matters worse was that the war was undertaken without sufficient planning and preparation for what would come after. As the Report rightly points out, many in both the US and British governments predicted that chaos could emerge if Saddam's iron grip were removed. The decisions to disband the Iraqi army and to bar all members of Saddam's Ba'ath Party (rather than just a few of its leaders) from positions in the successor government were huge mistakes. Iraq was not just a war of choice; it was an ill-advised and poorly executed policy.

Much of the Report focuses on British calculations and then Prime Minister Tony Blair's support for US policy. The decision to associate the UK with the United States was a defensible strategic choice for a smaller country that derived much of its influence from the closeness of the bilateral relationship. Where the Blair government got it wrong was in not pressing for more influence over the policy in exchange for its support. George W. Bush's administration might well have rejected such efforts, but the British government could then have exercised the option of distancing itself from a policy that many believed was unlikely to succeed.

Many lessons should be taken from the Iraq War. One is that, because assumptions fundamentally affect what analysts tend to see when they look at intelligence, flawed assumptions can lead to dangerously flawed policies. Nearly everyone assumed that Saddam's non-compliance with United Nations inspectors stemmed from the fact that he was hiding weapons of mass destruction. In fact, he was hiding the fact he did not have such weapons.

Likewise, before they started the war, many policymakers believed that democracy would emerge quickly once Saddam was gone. Ensuring that such fundamental and consequential assumptions are tested by "red teams" – those not supporting the associated policy – should be standard operating procedure.

There is also the reality that removing governments, as difficult as that can be, is not nearly as difficult as creating the security that a new government needs to consolidate its authority and earn legitimacy in the eyes of the public. Creating anything like a democracy in a society lacking many of its most basic prerequisites is a task of decades, not months.

The Report said little about the legacy of the Iraq War, but it is important to consider. First and foremost, the war disrupted the regional balance of power. No longer in a position to distract and balance Iran, Iraq instead came under Iranian influence. Iran was free not just to develop a meaningful nuclear program, but also to intervene directly and via proxies in several countries. Sectarian fighting poisoned relations between Sunnis and Shia throughout the region. The alienation felt by soldiers and officers of Saddam's disbanded army fueled Sunni insurgency and, ultimately, led to the rise of the so-called Islamic State.

The war had a profound effect not just on Iraq and the Middle East, but also on the UK and the US. The British parliamentary vote in 2013 against participation in any military effort to penalize Syrian President Bashar al-Assad for defying explicit warnings not to use chemical weapons in his country's civil war was surely related to the view that military intervention in Iraq had been a mistake. It is also possible that some of the mistrust of elites that led a majority of voters to support "Brexit" stemmed from the Iraq War experience.

The Iraq War and its aftermath similarly affected the thinking of US President Barack Obama's administration, which had little appetite for new military ventures in the Middle East at a time when many Americans were suffering from "intervention fatigue."

The danger, of course, is that lessons can be overlearned. The lesson of the Iraq War should not be that all armed interventions in the Middle East or elsewhere are to be avoided, but rather that they must only be undertaken when they are the best available strategy and when the results are likely to justify the costs. Libya was a recent intervention that violated this principle; Syria has been even more costly, but in its case for what was not done.

The Iraq War was costly enough without people learning the wrong lessons from it. That would be the ultimate irony – and only add to the tragedy. (Courtesy Project Syndicate)

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