

Women's Day 2024: Women's Rights in Afghanistan, "A Justification for War"

International Women's Day and "The Mullahs of Whitehall": Pioneering Afghan Sportswomen Denied UK Entry

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Global Research, March 06, 2024

Region: [Asia](#), [Europe](#), [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Women's Rights](#)

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We are reposting this article for Women's Day 2024. This article was first published in March 2013.

It was former British Prime Minister Harold Wilson who is attributed with the quote "a week is a long time in politics", referring to the speedy shifting sands of political priorities.

If a week is a while, approaching twelve years is a millennium.

Remember the deluge of political concern over the subjugation of Afghan women at the time of the October 2001 invasion? The tsunami of documentaries, articles, books on their plight, contributing to the justification of another invasion - actually for \$trillions of minerals, a geographically strategic country and a pipeline.

It is salutary to recap a few.

In November 2001 First Lady Laura Bush gave the President's weekly radio address, stating that the fight against terrorism was: "also a fight for the rights and dignity of (Afghan) women." The State Department marked her broadcast with an eleven page document on the Taliban's "war against women."

Hillary Clinton wrote of: "A post-Taliban" country "where women's rights are respected ..." The then UK Prime Minister Tony Blair talked of aid to Afghanistan being conditional on restoration of rights to women and girls.

General Colin Powell stated: "women's rights will not be negotiable."

Eight years later, UK politicians still said publicly that women's rights were a justification for war. Mark Malloch Brown, former Minister of State in the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, with responsibility for Africa, Asia and the UN, subsequently Administrator of the UN Development Programme, said in 2009: "The rights of women was one of the reasons the UK and many in the West threw ourselves into the struggle in Afghanistan. It matters greatly to us and our public opinion." (Action Aid Report: 7th October 2011.)

In a major speech, the same year, the then Foreign Secretary, David Miliband stated that

the UK's relationship with Afghanistan was a "partnership." (27th July 2009.)

Fast forward then, to 8th March 2013, International Women's Day, for which the UN had declared this year's theme as: "The Gender Agenda Gaining Momentum."

On the eve of Women's Day the Kabul Girls' Boxing Team, who were to participate in various events marking the Day, were refused entry to Britain by the UK Border Agency.

Organisations who had long planned welcomes, events and raised funds for the visit of three remarkable young people, who had overcome the restrictions of the most conservative of Afghan culture, expressed their frustration.

It has to be a supreme irony that it was not the Mullahs in Afghanistan who forced disappointment and curtailment on the team's movements - but the Mullahs in Whitehall. Ironically, the supreme "Mullah" at the UK Border Agency is woman, the Home Secretary, Theresa May.

On 7th March, the East London Fawcett Society, a branch of the UK's leading equality campaign, wrote to those involved with the initiative:

"We are very sorry to be sending this email to update you that the three boxers on their way to the UK for Saturday's event 'Fighting for Freedom - Afghanistan v UK' ... have been refused entry visas and will thus not be here for the bout with UK rivals on Saturday. This event is now cancelled.

On the eve of International Women's Day, we are thinking of our inspiring sisters in Afghanistan and around the world ..".

The UK Border Agency in Delhi had, for the second time, refused entry visas into the UK for Sadaf Rahem, Fahima Mohammad, Shabnam Rahman. The three boxers were on their way to the UK to train and fight as guests of the Foundation Women in Sport to mark International Women's Day.

The decision was lambasted as "utterly ridiculous" and "at odds with the ideals of the 2012 'Olympic Legacy' ", which the Department for Culture, Media and Sport announced, would aim to:

- Make Britain and great sporting nation
- Inspire
- Show off London's multicultural heritage. The young women had, for a second time, to travel all the way to the UK Border Agency in Delhi - history does not relate why it is beyond the UK Embassy in Kabul to issue such visas, avoiding considerable expense to people from a war torn country, where living for most is exceptionally hard.

All requested documentation, identification and a letter of support from the Centre of Peace and Unity, their long term supporters in Afghanistan, were presented - and rejected. The girls had expected to finally have their visas and head for the airport and London. Instead, they dejectedly returned to Kabul.

So much for the aims of the “Olympic Legacy”, including “multicultural heritage.”

Margaret Pope, Founder of Women in Sport, which raised funds for the visit, commented on her “extreme disappointment”, adding: “We are made to believe that avenues, especially here in the UK, are opening up to people such as Sadaf Rahem, Fahima Mohammad and Shabnam Rahman, who are trying to pursue their sporting dreams. There has been much talk of the legacy of the Olympics and rights for women in sport, but today, it is not the case for these women.”

Despite it being made clear to officials that the purpose of the visit to the UK was sport and that the women, who are all students, had financial support from Women In Sport for the duration of their trip, they were refused entry based on being unable to illustrate their financial circumstances in Afghanistan and concerns from the High Commission that they may not return to Afghanistan after their visit to the UK.

Melanie Brown, a former aid worker who has made a documentary, “Fighting for Peace” (i) about the women said: “I know how many challenges they have had to overcome in pursuit of their sport. They have continued boxing in the face of these, reaching excellence and representing their country internationally. However, in the face of (UK) bureaucracy they are powerless. This visa refusal will come as a bitter disappointment to them. They may as well have a big tick box saying are you from Afghanistan? Don’t bother.”

Rahimi, Mohammad and Rahman were also to train with Britain’s first licensed female boxer, Jane Couch, and to attend a charity auction in London to raise money for their gym in Kabul. Couch slammed the decision as: “absolutely unbelievable. They are just trying to make a change.”

The Women in Sport Foundation is down but definitely not out and: “remains committed to bringing them here to the UK this year, fighting for freedom.”

Margaret Pope adds: “One of the justifications for Britain’s military involvement in Afghanistan was to help improve the terrible situation for the country’s women. It is therefore a bitter irony that when there is a clear opportunity to assist some of the bravest, talented and most inspiring young Afghan women, bureaucratic delays are quashing their dreams.”

Melanie Brown states: “Making Afghans who request visas travel to a third country in order to receive them and then wait weeks to hear if they have been successful could cynically be seen as a way of discouraging all those but the very wealthy from visiting the UK..”

She has a point, just a week later, on 14th March, a Guardian headline read (Home Secretary) “Theresa May relaxes immigration rules for senior executives and elite graduates.” (ii)

In September 2010, at the United Nations in New York, Prime Minister David Cameron said: “Let’s be clear, you can’t build strong economies, open societies and inclusive political systems if you lock out women.”

Foreign Secretary William Hague said: “women must not be forgotten ...”

Just after the invasion, the then Prime Minister, Tony Blair, said on television “We will not walk away as the outside world has done so many times before.”

Between the former and current Prime Minister, Britain has clearly walked away from Afghan women, slammed the door and locked them out..

Notes

- i. http://socialdocumentary.net/exhibit/melanie_brown/1932
- ii. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2013/mar/14/relax-immigration-rules-theresa-may>

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