WOMEN’S RIGHTS AND WRONGS

Michael Keating

The most purchased women are the working-class girls who work in factories, with their husbands supporting them. They are often young and beautiful, and they are seen as symbols of the patriarchy's power. In Afghanistan, the situation is even more desperate. Women are not allowed to leave their homes without a male relative, and they are subjected to violence and abuse. The Taliban have加强对妇女的控制, even more strict than before. Women are not allowed to go to school, and they are not allowed to work outside the home. The situation is dire, and it is urgent that the international community takes action to help these women.
Aid and Afghanistan

In the absence of food aid unless Taliban practices changed.

Senior diplomats from donor countries talked about freezing aid funding. Aid officials in the field found themselves under intense pressure to clarify the basis upon which their aid would continue.

At one level the principles governing aid assistance are clear. Official UN documents, including the Secretary-General's statement of October 1996 and the 1997 Consolidated Appeal for Afghanistan, issued in December 1996, reiterated the need to implement programmes in accordance with the norms and standards enshrined in the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, International Humanitarian Law and the Constitution on the Rights of the Child.

But putting principles into aid practice is another matter. The track record of aid agencies in ensuring that human rights considerations are systematically incorporated into programming is not impressive. Yet awareness of gender issues, until very recently, has been low and not consistently incorporated into project selection, design, management and implementation.

Of the dozen or so UN agencies active in Afghanistan, none is headed by a woman and females are scarce in responsible posts. And all this when the collective experience of the aid community worldwide shows that those who are more involved in programming are more successful in it likely to be.

Meanwhile, aid staff are trying to cope with the practical and depressing consequences of Taliban pronouncements — closure of schools and the forced suspension of projects, as non-cooperation grounds of principle but because of the world one has been confined to home. Looting declarations from looted aid agencies have been particularly helpful in working out what to do, and often seem at odds with the logic of the situation at hand.

Compounding the pressure for aid staff on the spot are threats to their own security and the difficulty of communicating with the Taliban. Verbal assurances from "ministers" in Kabul often appear to carry no weight with Taliban in the street, far alone in the rest of the country. Trying to reach understandings with them is like going smoke.

Fault lines appearing

Insight into what is going on within the Taliban leadership is scarce, but there is growing evidence of major internal differences. The fault lines are likely to become more pronounced as major decisions regarding the administration of the country and the basis of its external relations become more pressing. Some suspect that the Taliban phenomenon may even implode, like many past-Pashtun movements before them.

A non-issue

For the Taliban, aid agencies' concerns about human rights are simply not a priority. Winning the war, preventing insurrection in Kabul and Herat, and keeping their own foot-soldiers in line are far more pressing. It is in this context that the question of conditionality is being debated. From the Taliban perspective, conditionality is in some ways a non-issue. Humanitarian aid must not be subject to conditionality — it would be both contrary to international humanitarian law and unacceptable to Western public opinion to allow people to die because of the authorities' human rights record.

The vast bulk of aid to Afghanistan is humanitarian or essential rehabilitation — that is, it provides people with the means to avoid humanitarian catastrophe, for example, by fixing water supplies or providing basic health services. De-mining and mine awareness programmes, which account for a large chunk of total aid funding, are equally essential to save lives.

As for longer-term development assistance, for such a poor country — the worst off outside Africa by any development standard — it is insignificant. If the war were to end and development aid became available, conditionality would immediately become more pertinent and could provide a powerful international lever that until then most donor countries are simply not prepared to provide the funds.

So what is conditionality about? A case can be made that the continued provision of essential aid is indirectly helping the Taliban — relieving them of the need to provide the population with basic services. But cutting aid is unlikely to make the Taliban feel more responsible towards the population. Such is their trust in divine providence that threats by agencies to suspend programmes, even if just the scene, would simply not work. The aid community would then be in an even worse position to respond to them.

Principle into practice

The reality is that, in the long term, conditionality might more productively be directed by Western politicians — who ultimately vote the money — at the aid agencies themselves, both UN and NGOs.

Those agencies which put into practice human rights and gender equity principles should be supported, and those which do not, admonished, even penalised. Conversely, the Taliban may have been of service; their success is likely to strengthen agencies' resolve and practice in this regard.

In the short term, aid agencies must continue to press the Taliban to allow the full participation of women, using every argument they can muster. But until the situation stabilises and the shape of Taliban authority becomes clearer, conditionality remains a very blunt weapon, one of the unappealing to Western politicians facing public opinion that aid workers trying to get a job done on the ground.