

The West Quiets Afghan Women

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Although women have made major strides towards equality in the 21st century, we also see a lingering tendency in the West to restrain these advances around the world. Let's turn to history for a moment.

Often dismissed as an anomaly, Afghan civil society blossomed under King Amanullah from 1919 to 1929. Declaring his independence from Britain in his inaugural address, Amanullah's sought to abolish slavery, discourage the veil, empower women, and introduce secular education for girls. Afghans generally accepted these reforms as in keeping with Islamic law.

But Britain's colonial gatekeepers opposed a secular, democratic Afghanistan. They, in the words of former U.S. Ambassador Leon Poulada, "saw a modernizing of Afghanistan as a threat to British rule in India since it offered an example of the kind of progress free Asians could achieve..."

Afghanistan is still viewed through a colonial lens. Despite real changes that have occurred during the last two centuries, the Victorian mentality -- immortalized by story-tellers like Rudyard Kipling -- obscures the many ways Afghanistan citizens strive for modernity.

During the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, America's journalists reconstituted the old British myths of "fierce tribal Afghan warriors," and today this faux mythologizing is reaching new heights, burying the real yearnings of Afghanistan's people. The movie *Charlie Wilson's War* now being filmed in Morocco may well further engrain these powerful misconceptions in the psyche of Americans and the world.

Governments and civil society must work to overcome such false image making. We must demand a genuine, honest 21st century mythology from our storytellers. We must stretch our imaginations and construct images of a future that we can all live within. We must appreciate that most of Afghanistan's men and women yearn for modernity, not tribal war.