



Debates of the Senate

1st SESSION

•

36th PARLIAMENT

•

VOLUME 137

•

NUMBER 109

AFGHANISTAN— PLIGHT OF GIRLS AND WOMEN

Speech by:

The Honourable Vivienne Poy

Tuesday, February 10, 1999

THE SENATE

Wednesday, February 10, 1999

HUMAN RIGHTS

AFGHANISTAN—PLIGHT OF GIRLS AND WOMEN

Hon. Vivienne Poy: Honourable senators, I rise today to draw attention to the desperate plight of women in Afghanistan.

Since 1996, a radical Islamic group has held power in that country. The Taliban regime has instituted a systematic campaign to erase the identity of women. Their freedom, dignity and physical well-being have been obliterated.

Women are being marginalized. They cannot leave their homes without a male relative. Windows in their homes are painted so that outsiders cannot see them. Other than as health care workers, women are not allowed to work. Professionals have been forced to abandon their jobs as teachers, writers, artists and professors. Schools for girls have been closed. No hospital will admit a woman and no male doctor may treat a female patient. The sick are being left to languish in facilities that have no running water, medicine or electricity. Foreign aid agencies are forbidden to offer services directly to women.

The law does not protect Afghan women. The Taliban's young and often illiterate enforcers are a law unto themselves. Men hold the power of life and death over female relatives. A raging mob can stone or beat a woman to death for exposing an arm or failing to cover her eyes in public. For some women, the only escape is suicide. Depression among women forced to stay in their homes has reached epidemic proportions. Those in the few

medical facilities that exist lie motionless on their beds, wrapped in their burquas, unwilling to speak or eat.

The treatment of Afghan women cannot be written off as a "cultural difference." Even among the fundamentalist regimes, the Taliban leaders are extremists. In the past, Afghan women enjoyed relative freedom. Seventy per cent of the country's teachers and 40 per cent of the doctors were women. Women were to be found at the top levels of Afghanistan's civil service.

Honourable senators, I know that the Canadian government is deeply troubled by the situation in Afghanistan. We have not had diplomatic ties with the country since 1979. This limits our direct influence, and we must find other ways to register our protest. Canada has been working hard through international organizations to force an end to the violation of women's rights in Afghanistan.

In March of last year, Canada sponsored the first UN resolution on the situation of Afghan women and girls. In December, Canada sponsored a second resolution brought forth by Germany in the UN General Assembly.

We must continue to protest this appalling situation. As Canadians, we maintain that universal human rights must transcend culture. The relentless attack of one segment of humanity against another is an affront to human dignity. Equality and human decency is a right, whether in Canada or Afghanistan.

Honourable senators, let us work together toward ensuring continued pressure is brought to bear to restore the rights of the women of Afghanistan.
