

Reproductive health care: an essential foundation for prosperity and peace

In the long aftermath of war, the people of both Iraq and Afghanistan are struggling to rebuild their nations. The task is daunting. Schools, courts, hospitals, and sanitation systems are just a few of the basic facilities and services needed in any functioning society. But amidst the many competing priorities, reproductive health care is essential and must not be overlooked.

Family planning and reproductive health services enable women and men to decide whether and when to have children. In times of great economic instability and social turmoil, that ability becomes more important than ever. For families already living on the brink, an unplanned pregnancy could mean starvation or impossible choices about who gets fed, clothed, and educated. In the absence of an effective health care system, women face a higher risk of death and injury in childbirth. And the horrors of sexual violence, an unfortunate and ubiquitous reality of war and lawlessness, are only worsened if injuries and infections go untreated and the risk of pregnancy cannot be reduced.

Reproductive health care is a core component of basic public health. It is as fundamental a responsibility as providing safe drinking water, functioning hospitals, and adequate food supplies. Reproductive health and family planning programs have been shown to speed a nation's development. Given the concern over the status of women in both Afghanistan and Iraq, reproductive health care will be particularly crucial in allowing women to benefit from social and economic opportunities.

The pre-war status of the women in these two countries was strikingly different. The desperate plight of Afghani women—symbolized for many by the compulsory burka—was seen as a manifestation of the Taliban's dangerous extremism, and thus part of the American government's *casus belli*, or justification for war. The repression of women was accompanied by a staggering burden of illness and disease. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) estimates that an Afghani woman has a 1 in 15 chance of dying from pregnancy or childbirth [1]. First Lady Laura Bush was among those who linked anti-terrorism efforts to a struggle for women's rights, calling the fight against terrorism "also a fight for the rights and dignity of women" [2].

In Iraq, in contrast, women—in urban areas, at least—have for many years enjoyed relative social and economic freedom and opportunities for education and independence. Now, many

wonder if Iraq's toppled secular government will be replaced with a conservative religious one and, if so, whether the freedoms women have enjoyed will be placed in jeopardy [3,4].

US Secretary of State Colin Powell recently wrote, "Countries that treat women with dignity, afford them a choice in how they live their lives and give them equal access to essential services and an equal opportunity to contribute to public life—these are the countries that are the most stable and viable" [5].

This is precisely the promise on which good reproductive services deliver. As plans are established for rebuilding Iraq and Afghanistan, all of us working in the reproductive health field will need to watch carefully to ensure that adequate support for reproductive health is included. Our goal must be to deliver the best possible reproductive health services to some of the most vulnerable populations on earth, and we must not let this responsibility be compromised to placate minority ideologues in Iraq, Afghanistan, or here at home. This vision cannot be subordinated to short-sighted political agendas. Although the war may be over, the struggle to alleviate suffering, speed recovery, and promote women's health and opportunity is just beginning.

Felicia H. Stewart, MD
ARHP Board Chair

Wayne C. Shields
ARHP President and CEO

Ann C. Hwang, MD
UCSF Center for Reproductive Health Research & Policy

References

- [1] United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). Fact sheet: reproductive health indicators for Afghanistan. Available at: <http://www.unfpa.org/emergencies/afghanistan/factsheet.htm>. Accessed May 2, 2003.
- [2] Cohen S. Reproductive health and rights. Keys to development and democracy at home and abroad. The Guttmacher Report on Public Policy. December 2001:1–3.
- [3] Tavernise S. Iraqi women wary of new upheavals. *New York Times*. May 5, 2003: A1.
- [4] King L. Women fear their rights will end with Hussein era: many in Iraq say their liberties and ambitions may be curtailed if Shiite religious leaders prevail. *Los Angeles Times*. April 27, 2003.
- [5] Powell C. Women's issues are integral to our foreign policy. *State Magazine*. April 2003:2.