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The Independent

Back to the bad old days: Karzai beats retreat on women's rights

President gives support to religious edict that reads: 'Men are fundamental, women are secondary'

Lianne Gutcher

Thursday, 8 March 2012

President Hamid Karzai has backed guidelines issued by Afghanistan's religious council that relegate women to the position of second-class citizens, raising questions about whether British soldiers should continue to put their lives at risk for a government that seems prepared to sell out on the issue in order to engage the Taliban in a peace deal.

The Afghan leader endorsed the repressive guidelines on Tuesday, the same day that six British soldiers were killed in an explosion in Helmand province. "Men are fundamental and women are secondary," the 150-member Ulema Council said in a statement that was subsequently posted on Mr Karzai's own website. It also said that men and women should not mix in work or education, and that women must have a male guardian when they travel.

Mr Karzai's endorsement, which came on the eve of International Women's Day today, is seen by critics as a huge step back in the effort to promote women's rights after the Taliban was displaced by the US invasion of the country in 2001.

Under the Taliban, girls were banned from going to school and women were not allowed to leave their homes without a male relative as an escort.

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Activists add that the new clerics' code of conduct is unconstitutional and that President Karzai's endorsement sets a worrying precedent for negotiations with the Taliban.

A spokesman for the British embassy in Kabul said: "We support women's rights in Afghanistan. We have made clear that any political settlement should be inclusive and address the concerns of all Afghan citizens. Our strategy remains to work with those in Afghan society who are advocating reform, in order to build support for full application of the Afghan Constitution, which upholds equal rights for both men and women."

The clerical guidelines are not legally binding and are described as "voluntary" for women who are devout. But if the rules became the norm, they would prevent male and female volunteers at organisations such as Young Women for Change (YWC) working together to empower women across Afghanistan.

YWC was set up last April by two young Afghan women, Noorjahan Akbar and Anita Haidary, but quite early on the founders realised they would be able to be much more effective if they got men involved.

The collaborative approach was one of the reasons Tayeb Khan, 22, decided to become a volunteer five months ago, an unusual move for a young Pashtun man in Afghanistan. "When I saw the organisational structure, men and women working together in a friendly environment, I wanted to come and be part of it," he said.

To mark International Women's Day, YWC is opening a female-only internet café in Kabul that will be dedicated to Sahar Gul, the teenage girl who was tortured and kept for months in her husband's dank cellar after refusing to enter into prostitution.

Many internet cafés in Afghanistan are full of men browsing internet porn and are off-putting to women.

Zafar Salehi, a 24-year-old YWC volunteer, struck a decidedly different note to the one implied by the guidelines backed by President Karzai. He said: "Now women can get connected with the world without harassment."

Another YWC volunteer, Mohammad Jawad, told *The Independent*: "Unless you let the other 50 per cent of society participate in society you will never progress and never develop."