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Farkhunda's Murder and the Imperative of Introspection

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Farkhunda's murder illustrates how weak institutional protections undermine women's rights, underlines the persistent and irresponsible influence of religious leaders in the country, and highlights the dangers of our tolerance of individuals, ideas, and institutions that propagate intolerance, inequality, and misogyny. Although the images of women carrying Farkhunda's

coffin at her funeral might seem to indicate a new chapter in gender relations in Afghanistan, the responses to her death arguably reinforce rather than challenge existing conceptions of honor, the “good” Afghan woman, and male protectiveness.

The very ability of a group of people to murder a person in broad daylight, in the center of the capital city, and in front of hundreds of witnesses, including the police, indicates how institutions have failed to protect Afghan citizens. Millions of dollars invested in police training and citizen empowerment stood for little in the face of a preacher’s impulsive allegation against a defenseless citizen. An allegation that was interpreted as a mandate to beat, kill, and burn Farkhunda. What meaning do elections, political institutions, speeches about empowerment, and capacity building programs have when people can incite hatred and violence against fellow-citizens with impunity?

Among the many witnesses, was there not a single human being who, instead of recording videos and sharing images of Farkhunda’s bloody body on Facebook, could have tried to stop the sadistic mob from committing such a series of inhuman acts?

Just as those people stood by as Farkhunda was tortured and murdered, too many of us stand by when we witness every day acts of misogyny and intolerance. It’s more convenient and we avoid upsetting people. Just as we assume the role of passive bystanders, the state also stands by and allow certain individuals and institutions to reinforce inequality and incite violence – not only against women, but vulnerable citizens in general.

Farkhunda’s case was extreme, drastic, and visible enough to eventually make legal institutions and the public condemn her murder, but atrocities against women remain all too common in Afghanistan and elsewhere. Thousands of women around Afghanistan are physically beaten, mentally tortured, and sexually abused by their family members every day. Yet, their cases remain unreported, invisible, and inconsequential: too many victims and survivors rarely get a chance to speak of their rights, to share their sorrows, and to be known. Many others adapt their behavior to avoid abuse, but live with the fear of violence at home and on the streets.

Farkhunda’s lack of control over the last moments of her life and lack of support from the state and fellow citizens are all too familiar to many Afghans. The state cedes jurisdiction over women to families, religious leaders, and society in return for power and stability. A Faustian bargain that impedes women’s efforts to shape their own lives, and complicates the work of human rights’ activists and movements. Farkhunda’s case is a potent symbol of the alienated life of every citizen who lives in fear of abuse, harassment, and violence – not just in Afghanistan, but around the world. The treatment she received echoes the daily fears, worries, and dilemmas that haunt countless individuals.

Farkhunda’s murder manifests the deep-rooted influence of religious leaders in the country. This influence is not organic – it has been nurtured and enabled by war and power politics. Power seekers have used religion deliberately as a powerful instrument to violate citizens’ rights in Afghanistan. The Mujahedeen used religion to curtail women’s role in public sphere back in 1980s and the Taliban legitimized their misogynistic and repressive state using religion.

Today, in Afghanistan's democratic era, many Mullahs continue to propagate misogynistic attitudes by using religion and encourage people to control women, marry them off, or burn them. They use religion to teach followers that women's bodies are not their own – they belong to men, to society. The democratic era and the presence of international community reinforced the power of religious leaders and institutions in Afghanistan, because challenging them was deemed to be too risky. Similar to the Mujahedeen and the Taliban, many religious institutions today reproduce and reinforce intolerance and misogyny in the country with tacit or explicit backing from multiple domestic and international actors.

Condemnations of Farkhunda's murder by innumerable Afghans, both men and women, have been widespread, but what is also needed is an introspective reflection on how and why so many of us have chosen to mourn Farkhunda and whether such mourning has the potential to catalyze substantive and sustainable gains for women's rights. The signs are not promising.

Many Afghan men have condemned Farkhunda's murder not as an inhuman or barbaric crime, but because 'Namos', meaning honor and legal property, was violated. Following Farkhunda's murder, Facebook statuses such as "We demand justice for Farkhunda because "Farkhunda is Kabulians' Namos"" from prominent male government authorities were common. This indicates that Farkhunda's case offended some men not as a violation of human rights but because they define women as someone's Namos or 'property' and cannot tolerate an attack on their Namos. Such reactions portray the persistence of patriarchy and misogyny rather than a movement towards the recognition of women's right to dignity and security.

Following Farkhunda's murder, many women activists 'broke the taboo' and shouldered Farkhunda's coffin at her funeral. However, the positive implication of this act of resistance is limited, because as the images show, the women holding the coffin are surrounded by a group of men, possibly members of Farkhunda's family, tightly holding hands in a circle, as if they are protecting them. Can women only break taboos with the approval of and under the protection and supervision of men? As the burial images illustrate, even while 'breaking a taboo', women may only be able to move within a limited circle surrounded, approved, and defined by men. We have reached a point where it is tempting to feel deeply grateful that men did not obstruct or attack the women carrying the coffin, and that some men showed compassion and provided protection. What does this say about our sense of insecurity and our expectations about men's behavior?

Farkhunda's burial must not reinforce the idea that women need to be protected by men or that they can only make demands within the bounds approved, defined, and secured by men. Men need to do much more to prove that they want to embody solidarity, rather than reinforcing hierarchical notions of strong, protective men and weak, defenseless women. Tolerating women's participation in carrying a coffin is simply not enough. Taking a stand against everyday acts that propagate vulnerability, insecurity, and impunity is imperative. Demands for justice and breaking taboos in such a manner are meaningless unless everybody recognizes that we are all complicit in enabling unjust individuals, institutions, and ideas to control people's lives and rob them of voice and agency.

We also need to consider whether we mourned Farkhunda because she was a human being or because she belongs to the "approved" subset of women. Was Farkhunda's murder nationally

mourned because she was a student of religious studies, memorized and taught the Quran, and wore “modest” clothes? Had it been someone studying a different major, wearing an outfit shorter and tighter, and a headscarf thinner than hers, would the reaction have been different? Will we continue to allow self-serving religious leaders and politicians to keep encouraging society to define women by the length of their clothes and the size of their headscarves? Or will we demand dignity and security for every citizen regardless of attire?

Farkhunda’s case is a warning to Afghan citizens, to the Afghan unity government, and to the international community. It reveals the persistence of challenges ahead for Afghans who want a just and egalitarian country. In this transitional era, who is to guarantee that women’s rights will remain protected and that religious institutions would never again use their power to sacrifice women’s rights and lives?

The unity government of Afghanistan is responsible for providing legal and institutional support for all citizens, including women. If it continues to allow people to propagate misogyny and incite violence against women, it will continue to fail its citizens, as it failed Farkhunda and other victims of misogyny and intolerance.

The responsibility to ensure such a case never recurs also rests with everyone of us: such tragedies should strengthen our resolve to raise our voices and oppose injustice, but also to look within ourselves and think critically about our own complicity in enabling the persistence of misogynistic practices, however big or small.