

WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN

Focus on Women

JULY 2002

INTRODUCTION

Women in Afghanistan have experienced severe hardship and many forms of rights violations. Access to education, health services and employment has been restricted in the extreme, and women have suffered serious limitations on their individual freedom of movement and actions. Women in Afghanistan have suffered so-called 'honour crimes', including disfigurement and death, for what is seen as breaches of familial honour. Since the fall of the Taliban regime, Afghan women have expressed hope for a better future, however, much needs to be done for this dream to be realised.

Recent history of Afghanistan

The recent history of Afghanistan has been characterised by war and disruption. In 1973 after 40 years of rule, the former king of Afghanistan, Mohammad Zahir Shah, was overthrown by his cousin Mohammad Daoud who then abolished the monarchy. Daoud was in turn overthrown in a coup in 1978, in which he was killed and a Marxist government was put into place. Splits rapidly appeared in the Afghan communist party and the government became unstable. When Hafizullah Amin took over as President, he was seen as a threat by the Soviets to the hitherto communist rule. In 1979 Amin was assassinated and Soviet troops moved into Afghanistan and set up a puppet government. This provoked Islamic fighters, or mujahadeen, to fight against the Soviets in an attempt to gain control of the government. Ten years of war resulted, in which one million Afghans were killed, and many more became refugees. Cases of mass killings and torture were reported.

The Soviets were driven out in 1989, and the mujahadeen continued to fight against the Soviet-established government and eventually took power. However infighting continued to devastate the country as power struggles between mujahadeen warlords continued. The rise of the Taliban was initially due to their call for the removal of mujahadeen groups. After intense fighting between Taliban and mujahadeen forces throughout 1994-95, the Taliban managed to take control of 90 per cent of the country. It was at this point that restrictions upon both men's and women's rights were introduced, including barring of women from working, attending school or going out alone.

Following the terrorist attacks in the United States in September 2001, US forces began a campaign against the Taliban, who they claimed were sheltering Osama bin Laden's Al-Quaida forces, responsible for the terrorist attacks. Supported by the US, Northern Alliance forces advanced rapidly and the Taliban lost control of the country. At present an interim government is in place, following a deal brokered by the United Nations. This authority includes elements of the Northern Alliance and other rival factions. It is designed to prepare the ground for a new assembly, which will rule for up to two years until elections can take place.

After gaining power, the Taliban introduced extremely restrictive laws based upon a strict interpretation of Islam and of Islamic Sharia law. Laws such as those banning many recreational activities and mandating prayer applied to both men and women, while others were particularly restrictive upon women. Women were not allowed to go to school or university, were not able to work (except for a very limited number of doctors and nurses), did not have adequate health care because they were not able to be treated by males, could not deal with male shopkeepers, could not go out in public or travel in a taxi except with a close male relative, and in public had to wear a burqa. Women who did not follow these restrictions were often beaten or killed.

Key issues affecting women



To receive Focus on Women please contact:
Communications Section
Commonwealth Office of the Status of Women
Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet

3-5 National Circuit
BARTON ACT 2600

tel: 02 6271 5722

fax: 02 6271 5751

e-mail: simon.moore@pmc.gov.au

ISSN 1445-7733

WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN

Statistics on the status of Afghan women

Due to the turmoil that the country has gone through there is a lack of information on conditions for women in Afghanistan. A United Nations report on the progress of women during the 1980s and 1990s was unable to provide data for Afghanistan in any areas, including education, employment and income. Limited statistics are available:

- Hardly any girls and only 24 per cent of boys attended school under the Taliban, only three per cent of girls received some primary educationⁱ
- Maternal mortality rate – 17 per thousand live births, which equals one every 30 minutes, the second-highest rate in the world; 15,000 women die due to pregnancy related causes every yearⁱⁱ
- Eight per cent of adult women are literateⁱⁱⁱ
- Life expectancy for women is 44 years^{iv}
- 23 per cent of the population have access to safe water^v

Factors affecting conditions for women in Afghanistan

World attention has tended to focus upon Afghanistan during Taliban rule, and the appalling conditions in which all Afghans, and particularly women, lived under this regime. In fact, Afghanistan's problems are far more deep-seated. After 23 years of almost continuous war, the country's infrastructure has been destroyed, millions of people have been killed and millions more are refugees or have been internally displaced. More than 65 per cent of refugees are women and children.^{vi} Basic services such as education and health care are inaccessible for many people. Extreme poverty is widespread with estimates of GDP per capita ranging between US\$180 and US\$800. This has been exacerbated by natural disasters such as devastating earthquakes in 1998 and 1999^{vii} and recent droughts. All of these factors mean that women, as well as men, have a very low standard of living.

Malnutrition of women is widespread. This is caused not only by the food scarcity linked to the conflict and the drought, but is also related to traditional preference in Afghan society for males, which makes women reduce their own food allowance in favour of men and children.^{viii}

Under the Taliban, the health of women suffered. Health care for women was woefully inadequate, with males forbidden from examining or treating women. While a very limited number of women doctors were allowed to practice, there were not



Photo courtesy UNHCR. Photographer F. Pagetti

enough to attend to the needs of millions of Afghan women. Restrictions on women's movement and the difficulties of providing services to refugees exacerbated the problems. Disease remains a problem, particularly in refugee camps. Currently, major causes of death for Afghans in refugee camps include pneumonia, cold and tuberculosis. High incidences of acute respiratory infections, diarrhoea, skin infections and worm infestation are reported in all camps. 40 per cent of Afghans suffer from some form of mental health problems as a result of the war, poverty and drought.

The effects of Taliban policies on women were extreme. Women were unable to work to support themselves, which exacerbated their poverty, particularly for those without male relatives. Widows especially, of which there were many due to the numbers of men killed in fighting (at least 40,000 widows in Kabul alone), were often forced to beg on the streets or move into prostitution. The restrictions on women's movements, as well as the requirement that they wear the burqa at all times in public, meant that women in particular found it difficult to escape the conflict.

One of the most extreme instances of women's human rights abuses in Afghanistan and other parts of the world are so-called 'honour crimes'. 'Honour crimes' are crimes of violence against women and girls, including murder, carried out because their behaviour is seen to have brought shame to their families. The crimes are usually committed by their husbands, fathers, brothers or other close male relatives. Reasons for honour crimes can be because a woman has (or allegedly has):

- committed adultery
- seen in public with a man
- gone out with a boyfriend
- sought a divorce
- become employed
- been raped
- defied a parental order to marry
- gone out without the permission of male relatives

Worldwide about 5000 women are killed in honour killings each year. Honour crimes are widespread in countries with traditions in which women are often

seen as the property of their families or husbands, and thus the honour of women (usually meaning their morality and virginity) is strongly linked to that of their families. Honour crimes are especially prevalent in Pakistan, Iraq, Egypt, Jordan, Afghanistan, Palestine and Turkey, although they have also been reported in many other countries.

Not all honour crimes involve killings. Particularly in Pakistan and Bangladesh, mutilations are common. Women may be disfigured or blinded with acid or have noses, ears or other body parts slashed or cut off by their husbands or male relatives. Or they may be burnt in incidents made to look like kitchen accidents.

The fall of the Taliban regime

On 7 October 2001, the United States and its allies began a military operation in Afghanistan to try to destroy the Al-Qaida terrorist network and unseat the Taliban. There were aerial bombing raids against Al-Qaida and Taliban targets. It was reported that many members of the terrorist network were killed in the raids, however many civilians also lost their lives when bombs landed residential areas and on hospitals.

The Northern Alliance, supported by US forces, moved against the Taliban who lost control of the country. An interim government has been put in place, in preparation for a new assembly that will rule the country and oversee its rebuilding until elections can be held.

Following the fall of the Taliban regime and the lifting of many restrictions upon their activities and movement, Afghan women began to be more active in public life. Schools for girls have begun to reopen and some women have been able to return to their jobs. Activities including conferences and international meetings have taken place within and outside of Afghanistan, in order to ensure that women are involved in the reconstruction of post-Taliban Afghanistan. There have been moves to achieve representation in a national government, lifting of dress restrictions (garments such as the burqa were widespread in rural Afghanistan prior to Taliban rule), and access to professional jobs, as well as a strong focus on restoring basic education and health services, community and civil society development. However, millions of Afghan women continue to need assistance simply to return to their homes, restart farms or other businesses, get health care denied to them under the Taliban and overcome illiteracy. Women must be involved, and their needs must be recognised, in all aspects of rebuilding the country, not only in forming a government. Many Afghan women's groups are actively pursuing these goals.

The current world focus on the situation in Afghanistan provides an opportunity for Afghan women to have their needs in the rebuilding of their country recognised. However some Afghan women have complained that the West has focused too much on superficial changes that have occurred since the Taliban's removal. For instance, the wearing of the burqa has often been seen in the West as a symbol of oppression. But removal of the requirement to wear it, while important, is relatively insignificant compared to the enormous challenges still facing women.

Future options

Afghanistan faces the immense job of rebuilding following the devastation of drought and upheaval. Whilst the Taliban restrictions on women have been nominally lifted, the majority of women are still too afraid or too disadvantaged, after so many years of isolation and exclusion from all aspects of education and public social life, to enter into Afghan society in a participatory way. During this time of rebuilding, it is essential that women are empowered to participate so that the future Afghan society has from its very foundations a strong sense of shared ownership by men and women, and that institutions are rebuilt incorporating the needs and concerns of both women and men. Much work needs to be done at all levels, both at the grassroots and throughout institutional and political development. Education will need to be provided on women's human rights to women and men. Women will require targeted support to develop their skills and ability to participate actively in work and income generation. Women will have to be specifically empowered to participate in the formulation of the laws and institutions set to govern the re-built Afghanistan, through institutions such as a strong Ministry of Women's Affairs, and ensuring that women are represented and have a role in the development of the administrative, political, representative and legislation and decision-making bodies.

Australian Government assistance

Since September 2001, the Australian Government has committed \$41.3 million in humanitarian and reconstruction assistance to Afghanistan. This has included food aid, measures to restore essential infrastructure, resettlement assistance for displaced people, water sanitation, removal of landmines, immunisation, nutrition, literacy programs, primary education and training and income generation for women.

WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN

In allocating its assistance, Australia has supported programs that directly benefit women and children. For example, Australian Government support to CARE Australia has been directed towards a program of Emergency Assistance to Urban Poor, Displaced and Female-headed households in eastern Afghanistan and western Pakistan. This program is providing two-month food packages to vulnerable female-headed households. Australian funding is also assisting UNICEF's Afghanistan Emergency Nutrition Program, which provides supplementary and therapeutic foods for pregnant women and young children. Projects to build the capacity of local NGOs currently being implemented through Australian Volunteers International and CARE Australia will target as a key feature women's participation in civil society.

Some ways to help Afghan women

- Organise fundraising for Afghan women projects, such as those run by the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA), the Feminist Majority Foundation, and the Afghan Refugee Association.
- Support the work of UNIFEM (United Nations Development Fund for Women). UNIFEM Australia are inviting people to raise funds for women in Afghanistan through participating in a 'Spring Walk', which you can host and complete at any time. See www.unifem.org.au for details.
- Contact the Australian Council for Overseas Aid regarding the work of NGOs in Afghanistan at www.acfoa.asn.au.
- Contact Dr Nouria Salehi of the Afghan Australian Volunteers Association to discuss how you or your organisation can help women in Afghanistan, for example through fundraising for micro-finance and small business projects for women at Nouria.Salehi@mh.org.au.

Photo courtesy UNHCR. Photographer P. Benatar



- Sign a Statement of Support for the Declaration of the Essential Rights of Afghan Women. The Declaration was developed by Afghan and non-Afghan women at the 2000 Conference for Women of Afghanistan.
- Support international campaigns that target the practice of 'honour crimes' against women around the world, including in Afghanistan. See www.amnesty.org.au for details.
- Voice your views in discussions regarding the Afghanistan Interim Administration's National Development Framework at www.developmentgateway.org.

Further sources of information include:

- Amnesty International (<http://www.amnesty.org.au>)
- The International Committee of the Red Cross (<http://www.icrc.org>)
- Feminist Majority Foundation (<http://www.feminist.org>)
- RAWA (<http://rawa.fancymarketing.net>)
- The Afghan Women's Mission (<http://afghanwomensmission.org>)
- Global Fund for Women (<http://www.globalfundforwomen.org/4news/events/highlights/brussels-solidarity.html>)
- Index of magazine articles on Afghanistan (<http://www.magportal.com/c/soc/reg/as/afg/>)
- Links to a lot of useful sites (<http://www.afghan-web.com/woman/>)
- UNHCR updates on the situation in Afghanistan (<http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/afghan>)
- UNIFEM's initiatives to help Afghan women, particularly in increasing involvement in government and leadership (<http://www.unifem.undp.org/afghanistan/>)
- UN's work, reports and resolutions on women in Afghanistan (<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/afghanistan/>)

- i Report of the Secretary-General, *Discrimination Against Women and Girls in Afghanistan*, E/CN.6/2002/5, para 18.
- ii Ibid para 14-16; and www.savethechildren.org.
- iii Ibid.
- iv www.savethechildren.org.
- v E/CN.6/2002/5, para 14-16.
- vi www.unhcr.ch.
- vii CIA World Fact Book 2001: Afghanistan, www.cia.gov.
- viii UNICEF, E/CN.4/Sub.2/2001.28.