

ODUMUNC 2009 Issue Brief
Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)
Situation of Women and
Girls in Afghanistan
Melodee Baines & Katie Foley



In 2009 women and girls are the most unprotected people in Afghanistan. Violence against women and girls is increasing.ⁱ

Introduction

Afghanistan remains among the poorest nations in the world. Ravaged by violent conflict and struggling to establish and maintain democratic institutions, the country remains in a state of crisis since the end of Taliban rule in 2001. Recent news out of Afghanistan has focused on the civilian deaths from US air strikes. However, the situation of the women and girls of Afghanistan has largely disappeared from media coverage in recent times. Despite their disappearance from headlines, the crises currently plaguing Afghanistan underscore the dire situation for all Afghans. In 2008, rising food costs, drought, refugee resettlement and security problems have contributed to the worsening humanitarian crisis in Afghanistan despite the reduction in attention and aid from the outside world. Disturbing still is the predicted record yields of opium, a crop that provides funding for the Taliban.

Background.

The Taliban's gender apartheid ended November 2001. On 5 December 2001 the UN Security Council "established an integrated, international peace building operation in Afghanistan, under the leadership of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)."ⁱⁱ After the establishment of the Transitional Authority in 2002, two government ministers were assassinated, in addition to other attempted assassinations and death threats of officials supportive of women's rights. There have also been attacks on and destruction of girls' schools. Optimistically, the government approved a new constitution in 2004, and Afghans voted in national presidential elections in October 2004 and National Assembly and Provincial Council elections the following year. In addition to other democratic and humanitarian developments, the 2004 constitution articulates legal equality between men and women. As of the 2005 elections, women occupy 27 percent of the seats in the lower house of parliament and 17 percent of the upper house of parliament.ⁱⁱⁱ Presidential elections are scheduled for 2009. Despite electoral advances for women, their status and daily lives have improved little since 2001. In 2004, according to CARE most international aid since 2001 has gone to military spending instead of reconstruction, internal security forces and humanitarian needs.^{iv}

Current situation

The key factors with the most immediate effect on the lives of women and girls in Afghanistan are the poor health conditions, extreme weather conditions, lack of educational opportunities and lack of security. WomenWatch, a UN Initiative of the Inter-Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality (IANWGE), has not published a report on the situation of women and girls since 2003. The subject was en vogue immediately following the end of Taliban control on 2001. However, in recent years, the situation of women and girls in Afghanistan has failed to maintain the interest of media outlets and scholars.

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Severe food insecurity and high maternal death rates have the most dramatic impact on the health of Afghan women. More women die in childbirth in Afghanistan than elsewhere.^v The superlative temperatures of the winter early in 2008, followed by the drought, have both extended the strain on the insufficient food supply, but also augmented hardships that women and children face as a result of no heating and no access to water. Remote areas of the country have no electricity, and even in Kabul electricity is available only a few hours each day.

Reports from July 2008 assert that “humanitarian problems [in Afghanistan] were getting worse as a result of soaring food prices, declining security and increasing civilian deaths.”^{vi} The situation, furthermore, is deteriorating. Increasing costs of food as a result of the global food crisis, in addition to drought and the resettlement of returning refugees from Pakistan and Iran have added to the strain. There have also been increases in civilian deaths (from both insurgency and friendly fire) and internally displaced people. The lack of security complicates the delivery of food aid and humanitarian supplies.

Perpetrators of rape and other violence against women go unpunished, and victims often remain silent because of the shame and dishonor of the crimes.^{vii} Instead families of perpetrators offer up a male relative, sometimes the rapist himself, as a husband to salvage the girl or woman’s reputation. Child marriage and betrothal also remain common practices, with families engaging children as young as three. “About 16 percent of Afghan children are married under the age of 15, according to recent data from UNICEF, and there is evidence that the poverty of recent years is pushing down the marriage age further in some areas.”^{viii} Data from the UN suggests that in as much as 43 percent of marriages, at least one spouse is younger than 16.^{ix} Often the engagements occur as a form of financial relief—a commercial transaction between the guardian and potential husband or his guardian to relieve the extreme poverty and desperation.^x Rates of suicide, including self-immolation, among women continue to rise and no organization has sought to investigate or understand the reasons behind the increase.

There are organizations whose mission is to improve the situation of women and girls in Afghanistan. On 23 March 2003 Afghanistan ratified the Convention on the Elimination of the All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). According to Dr. Husn Banu Ghazanfar, Afghan Minister of Women’s Affairs, the Ministry is “the only governmental policy making organization coordinates, leads, monitors and controls the activities of governmental organizations and national and international NGOs that work and serve the Afghan women and girls.”^{xi} In addition, the Independent Human Rights Commission, founded in 2003 as a result of resolution 134/48 of the United Nations general assembly, continues to monitor government and other institutional activities.

Role of the United Nations.

The focus of the UN in Afghanistan is democratic peace building, and the UN provides no dedicated program to situation of women and girls in Afghanistan. Whereas the UN came out strongly against the lax punishment of rapists in a statement made in August 2008,^{xii} there have been reports of child abuse and exploitation by UN Peace Keepers themselves in Afghanistan

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and elsewhere.^{xiii} The U.N. special representative for children in armed conflict is preparing a report on the current condition of Afghan children after the establishment of a system to monitor and report child abuse in the summer of 2008.

In 2006, the UN called for expansion of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Kabul with its approval of Resolution 1707. Currently the UN considers the most urgent need of all Afghans to be food aid, seed and fertilizer for food production. UN Resolution 61/18 of January 2007 acknowledges constitutional efforts to improve the political situation of women in Afghanistan, meanwhile indicating that women's empowerment is necessary at both the national and provincial level. In addition, the resolution makes specific mention of the continued violation of human rights of women and children. The resolution condemns violence against women activists and activists promoting women's rights while emphasizing the need for investigation of allegations of violence against women and children in general.

Country positions

Whereas the United States articulates a non-negotiable demand for the equal treatment of women as an imperative of US foreign policy,^{xiv} the country's response to the UN request to expand the ISAF has been lethargic, insisting that internal security forces should assume responsibility for security outside of the capital city.^{xv} The US denies the civilian death tolls in air strikes killing civilians in 2008. However, the UN corroborates the strikes with the Afghan authorities.^{xvi} Canada allocates more aid to Afghanistan than any other country,^{xvii} although in 2008 the country has elected to begin withdrawing troops as a result of mounting casualties.^{xviii} The EU as of September 2008 supports redoubling international effort in Afghanistan.^{xix} The withdrawal of Canadian forces belies the fatigue of NATO forces in Afghanistan. The governments of the remaining forces, including the US, France and Germany, have faced domestic criticism accusing them of avoiding the most dangerous southern areas even though ISAF troops have far expanded beyond Kabul and are operating in the south and east.

Internal to Afghanistan, the mostly highly educated representative government resembles very little the poverty-stricken majority of the population. Women occupy largely the private sphere, and tribal jirgas (the informal court like system that exists at the community level) are the most democratic institution at the community. Importantly, all military aged men are able to make decisions and have opinions at the jirga but women are not allowed. Women's rights are increasingly important because of the high number of widows in the country and the high rate of rural to urban migration. As women are forced to move about outside of the home, they risk ostracism in their rural communities.

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Recommended Reading

Afghan Women Leaders Connect

<http://www.afghanwomenconnect.org/>

Afghan Women's Network

<http://www.afghanwomensnetwork.org/>

Afghanistan Conflict Monitor

<http://www.afghanconflictmonitor.org/women/index.html>

Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission

<http://www.aihrc.org.af/>

Afghanistan National Development Strategy

<http://www.ands.gov.af/>

Afghanistan Research and Evaluation Unit (AREU)

<http://www.areu.org.af/>

Feminist Majority Foundation

<http://www.feminist.org/afghan/afghanfilm.pdf>

Human Rights Watch

<http://www.hrw.org/press/2002/11/herat1105.htm>

International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)

<http://www.nato.int/ISAF/index.html>

Ministry of Women's Affairs Official Website

<http://www.mowa.gov.af/Home.aspx>

Paris Conference 2008

http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/country-files_156/afghanistan_498/international-conference-in-support-of-afghanistan-paris-12th-june-2008_6366/ministerial-conference-june-12-2008_6370/index.html

Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA)

<http://www.rawa.org/index.php>

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United Nations General Assembly, The situation in Afghanistan
<http://www.un.org/ga/62/plenary/afghanistan/bkg.shtml>

United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights Afghanistan
<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Countries/AsiaRegion/Pages/AFIndex.aspx>

United Nations website providing information to humanitarian relief organizations
<http://www.reliefweb.int/library/documents/2002/icg-afg-15mar.pdf>

Women for Afghan Women (WAW)
<http://www.womenforafghanwomen.org/>



Global Governance; Apr-Jun2007, Vol. 13 Issue 2, p255-275, 21p, 1 map
Illustration: p256

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- ⁱ <http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/asiapcf/08/07/afghan.family/index.html>
http://www.rawa.org/temp/runews/2008/09/09/self-immolation-on-the-rise-among-women_0987.html
<http://www.rawa.org/temp/runews/2008/09/11/facing-up-to-rape-in-afghanistan.html>
- ⁱⁱ Ponzio, Richard J. "Transforming Political Authority: UN Democratic Peacebuilding in Afghanistan." *Global Governance* 13, no. 2 (April 2007): 255-275.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Ponzio, *ibid.*
- ^{iv} <http://www.feminist.org/afghan/afghanfilm.pdf>
- ^v Kantrowitz, B. "What kills one woman every minute of every day?." *Newsweek* 150, no. 2 (July 02, 2007): 56.
- ^{vi} Cumming-Bruce, N.I.C.K. "U.N. Warns of Food and Security Crises in Afghanistan." *New York Times* (July 02, 2008): 1.
- ^{vii} http://www.womenforafghanwomen.org/press/ABC8_07.html
- ^{viii} Alisa Tang. In Afghanistan, a Fiancee Aged 3 Afghan Parents Arrange Marriages for Children As Young As 3. October 13, 2007 (AP) http://womenforafghanwomen.org/press/AP10_07.html
- ^{ix} Tang, *ibid.*
- ^x http://womenforafghanwomen.org/press/USATODAY7_07.html
- ^{xi} http://www.mowa.gov.af/content/about_mowa/minister_message_abt_website_broadcasting_eng.html
- ^{xii} <http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2008/08/28/asia/AS-Afghan-Rapists-Freed.php>
- ^{xiii} Shabazz, Saeed. "UN continues double talk on peacekeeping sexual abuse report." *New York Amsterdam News* 99, no. 26 (June 19, 2008): 2-2.
- ^{xiv} <http://www.feminist.org/global/cedaw/cedaw.pdf>
- ^{xv} <http://www.feminist.org/afghan/afghanfilm.pdf>
- ^{xvi} <http://www.rawa.org/temp/runews/2008/09/15/afghanistan-is-in-its-worst-shape-since-2001-european-diplomat-says.html>
- ^{xvii} Geddes, John. "Quick change of plan: UN aid looks safe." *Maclean's* 120, no. 31/32 (August 13, 2007): 21-21.
- ^{xviii} Land, Thomas. "UN predicts a bumper opium crop." *Middle East* (April 2008): 28-29.
- ^{xix} <http://www.rawa.org/temp/runews/2008/09/15/afghanistan-is-in-its-worst-shape-since-2001-european-diplomat-says.html>