Helpdesk Research Report: Gender in Afghanistan
22.08.07

Query: What are the key issues relating to gender in Afghanistan? Please include information on key trends and current issues; statistics; relevant government policies; and high profile messages and statements.

Enquirer: DFID Bangladesh (South Asia Regional)

Contents
1. Overview
   - General
   - Key trends and issues
   - Statistics and data
   - Policies and Institutions
   - Messages and Statements
2. Key documents
3. Additional information

1. Overview

“In many ways being an Afghan woman is one of the most difficult things in the world…”

Afghanistan MDG Report 2005

The vast majority of the literature on gender in Afghanistan focuses on the situation of women. There is little variance in the key messages. Most commentators agree there has been rapid and significant progress in many areas – the Afghan government has committed itself to various international human rights instruments; gender equality is now considered government policy; significant numbers of women voted in the 2004 parliamentary elections; a ministry for women’s affairs now exists; women’s access to healthcare has improved; and they enjoy modest levels of political participation. However, as Deniz Kandiyoti argues, legal and governance reforms are of little practical use unless an improved security situation allows women to enjoy their rights. Domestic legal frameworks and the judicial system are not able to enforce the standards set by international human rights instruments, and national frameworks are not necessarily able to influence local communities and households. The security and economic environment, as well as the general conservatism of Afghan society, continue to define the context within which Afghan women live. Women are still vulnerable to various forms of violence including forced marriages, domestic violence, honour killings, kidnappings, harassment and intimidation, and suffer from poor political representation and lack of access to basic services. Women in rural areas are especially subject to authoritarian and traditional practices which restrict them to the home and deny them access to education, healthcare and employment opportunities.

Moreover, in some areas, women’s development has declined even beyond the levels of the Taliban era. Several recent studies have recorded increases in forced marriages, attempts at suicide by self-immolation, and attacks on women to settle ethnic rivalries. In some cases, rural women have reported that the risk of violence and intimidation is greater now than it was during Taliban rule. In fact, violence and intimidation appear to be the most critical issues facing Afghan
women today. In addition, there also is evidence that the political participation of women has declined since 2001.

There is a great deal of literature on the status of women in Afghanistan. However, much in-depth work was generated during the years immediately following the overthrow of the Taliban. Where possible, this query has prioritised more recent research as evidence of the key issues facing women in Afghanistan today.

2. Key documents

General

- UNIFEM Afghanistan Country Profile  
  [http://www.womenwarpeace.org/afghanistan/afghanistan.htm](http://www.womenwarpeace.org/afghanistan/afghanistan.htm)
  This page provides an overview of the situation of women in Afghanistan including political, security, economic and human rights aspects.

  This paper emphasizes that routine violations of women’s rights in Afghanistan are determined by distinct but overlapping and mutually reinforcing sets of influences: the dynamics of gendered disadvantage, the destruction of local livelihoods and growing poverty, the criminalisation of the economy, and insecurity caused by the presence of armed groups and factions. Particular combinations of new pressures (such as poverty, indebtedness and vulnerability to local strongmen) and existing practices (such as the early marriage of girls in exchange for a bridewealth) create situations which can be misunderstood as expressions of local “culture”. This detracts critical attention away from the full complexity of the issues that affect the vulnerability of girls and women. Section 3 also focuses on the process of institution building and reform since 2001 and is cited below in the ‘Policies and Institutions’ section.

Key trends and issues

**Violence and access to justice**

- Benard, C., et al., 2008, 'Women and Nation Building', RAND Centre for Middle East Public Policy, Santa Monica  
  This study looks at the impact of societal circumstances and nation-building processes in post-conflict countries (in particular, Afghanistan) on the status of its female population, as well as the role of women in post-conflict nation-building. Chapter 2 includes information on the impact of five security areas on women: the social and economic front, insurgent attacks, crime, domestic violence, and justice. Key points include:
  - **Insurgents**: Women have frequently been targeted for a variety of reasons, such as running girls schools. The Taliban have bombed schools and assassinated teachers; women have been targeted during election campaigns; Afghan women working for international organizations and NGOs have also been threatened and targeted.
  - **Crime**: While data on rape is difficult to obtain, organizations such as Amnesty International have documented many cases of rape and domestic abuse (see AI reports below). Women rarely report rape because of the social stigma attached to the victim and her family; ineffective investigation mechanisms; and the failure of the state or local tribes to provide justice to victims. Women fear imprisonment, harassment, and discrimination from the police for reporting rape – as well as rejection or violent reactions from their own family.
Domestic violence: Violence against women by family members is widespread. This can consist of denial of education and economic opportunities, verbal and psychological violence, beatings, sexual violence, and murder. Specific examples include the betrothal of young girls in infancy, early marriage, forced marriage, and honour crimes. In addition, forced marriages are also common in Afghanistan. Page 86 contains additional information on the increase of cases of self-immolation.

Justice system: The paper cites 2004 World Bank report which argued that Afghanistan had one of the most corrupt governments in the world (p.31). It also states that prosecutors have often refused to open investigations into cases involving domestic violence or to order protective measures for women at risk from their family or community. Complaints from victims of domestic violence are widely dismissed by the police as a private matter, and victims are often advised (and sometimes pressured) to return to their abusive spouses and family.

Governance: The report cites an observation by Isobel Coleman of the Council on Foreign Relations that ‘women's inclusion in Afghanistan's government, which the international community has been using as an indicator of democratic progress, is actually regressing’ (p.73). Pages 73-74 provide a table demonstrating declining participation of women at provincial and national levels.

Economic participation: The loss of men during years of conflict has left many women as heads of the household. However, their role is not easily measured. Women also played a significant role in Afghanistan's economy during the 1980s, comprising 70% of the country’s teachers, 40% of its doctors and half of its government workers (from the 2004 UN Human Development Report for Afghanistan, cited on p.94 of this paper). This was however, largely an urban phenomenon. Concerning women today, the same report states: 'Poverty dis-empowers Afghan women much more insidiously than official discrimination does. As long as women are focused on meeting their own and their families' basic needs for food, water, and shelter, they are effectively blocked from seeking real power via education, activism, and legislation.’ (p.100). Pages 93-109 offer a detailed analysis of the economic participation of women in pre-war times, during war and the Taleban era, and today.


This report includes information on violence against women within the family; the exchange of women and girls in dispute resolution; violence against women by armed groups; and sexual abuse in custody. Section 5.3 of this report describes how women in the rural areas, which are home to 85% of the country's population, are at risk of rape, abduction, and forced and underage marriage by armed groups. In parts of Afghanistan, women have stated that the insecurity and the risk of sexual violence they face make their lives worse than during the Taleban era (p.19).

Social and economic issues


This report identifies key areas where gender-responsive actions are likely to enhance growth and poverty reduction. It finds that opportunities available to Afghan women in health, education, employment, and legal and political rights are extremely low by world standards. It also states that two decades of conflict have not only led to a breakdown of infrastructure and delivery of services in Afghanistan, but have also contributed to the downward trend of women’s rights (p.8). According to the United Nations’ National Human Development Report (2004), Afghanistan placed third from last on the Gender Development Index. Chapters 2 to 5 offer detailed information on the status of women in relation to education, health, economic
opportunities and legal rights. This report is also a very good source for statistics on the areas below:

- **Health:** The poor health situation of women in Afghanistan does not reflect deliberate gender discrimination in households, but poverty and the general lack of health facilities, together with a number of social factors, such as low marriage age and high fertility affect women particularly hard. In addition, women are often reluctant to seek medical assistance from male health workers; there is lack of awareness of maternal health care among men and women; and insufficient awareness of health, hygiene and nutrition.

- **Education:** Security is a major factor affecting the enrolment of girls in schools; political opponents to the present government are targeting girls' schools and carrying out terrorist attacks such as bombing or burning down schools, and campaigning against female education.

- **Work and employment:** Female wage labor is usually viewed as a last resort, and women earn only half as much as men, or less. Women have few marketable skills and are generally poorly educated. With a fertility rate of 6.3, reproduction and related health issues take up much of women's time.

- **Legal Rights and Voice:** Afghan women face constitutional equality but legal inequality. There are also great discrepancies between customary law, civil law and Islamic law – and many are subject to the informal justice system, which grant women even less rights. There is a culture of impunity concerning violence against women within and outside the household. The deteriorating security situation in many parts of the country constitutes the most serious obstacle to promoting rule of law, respect for human rights and introduction of legal reform, which is needed to truly address gender issues in Afghanistan.

**Statistics and data**

- **UNIFEM Afghanistan Fact Sheet, May 2007**
  [http://www.unama-afg.org/docs_/UN-Docs_/fact-sheets/07mayUNIFEM-fact-sheet.pdf](http://www.unama-afg.org/docs_/UN-Docs_/fact-sheets/07mayUNIFEM-fact-sheet.pdf)

  This fact sheet contains statistics on women in Afghanistan including information on women's participation in the political sphere, labour force, justice sector, security services, and peace-building effort; as well as on the main issues affecting them including education, health, marriage and sexual and gender-based violence. This fact sheet is also cited in the ‘Policies & Institutions’ section below.


  The report assesses Afghanistan's progress in working towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and offers an overview of the current status of gender equality in Afghanistan, in terms of women's participation in the education, political and economic spheres, as well as a range of relevant statistics. Other key points include:

  - A comparison of primary school completion rates with 16 other countries in the region showed Afghanistan to be the only country 'seriously off-track' in its progress towards meeting the MDG goal of eliminating gender disparities in education. Despite massive increases in enrolment, the rates for both girls and boys have risen uniformly and have not converged. As a result there are still only about 60 girls to 100 boys at the primary level, 33 girls to 100 boys at the secondary level, and only 21 girls for every 100 boys at the tertiary level.
  
  - Amongst its neighbouring countries, landlocked Asian and post conflict countries, Afghanistan has the lowest percentage of female literacy.
  
  - Afghanistan has almost the highest percentage of seats allocated for women in the national parliament but this will have little impact on women's political participation.
unless they are involved in local-level decision-making. At present, women are poorly represented at the sub-national level and in local governance bodies.

- Even at the conservative estimate of 1,600 deaths per 100,000 live births (the higher estimate puts the rate at 2,200 deaths), Afghanistan has one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world. In 2002, a UNICEF study found that in the Ragh district in Badakshan province an estimated 65 women die from pregnancy related causes per 1,000 live births. This is the highest rate ever recorded.
- Almost 9 out of 10 births take place at home and almost 8 out of 10 are attended by unskilled attendants.
- It is estimated that nearly 78% of these deaths are preventable.
- Almost half of all girls are married before the age 18. 1 in 7 girls are married before they reach the age of 15.
- The average number of medical doctors per 1,000 people in Afghanistan is 0.1, against 1.1 for all developing countries. There is great inequality between provinces and districts. In Balkh for instance, there is one doctor per 1,000 people, while in Uruzgan there is 1 doctor per 100,000 people.
- The environmental factors that contribute to poor maternal health are poor infrastructure and lack of access to health services, lack of education resulting in low levels of health awareness amongst mothers and lack of trained female health workers, geographic inaccessibility in rural areas of health services, education, food security, poverty and poor nutrition, and the traditional status of women in Afghan society.


This paper argues that five years after the fall of the Taliban regime, the legal and political gains made on paper for women and girls are not matched by the reality on the ground. Honour killings have been on the rise; while security for women living in many provinces is worse now than it was in 2001. In the last two years Afghanistan has also witnessed the murder of women aid workers, attacks on women election workers, continuing domestic abuse, trafficking and forced prostitution, a steep rise in cases of self-immolation, high rates of child marriage, the kidnapping of young women, and minimal protection from rape and assault. Pages 11 onwards include a very useful table comparing a range of research-based and anecdotal evidence of the realities of life for Afghan women against the various legal provisions designed to promote their well-being. Many of the key points highlight Afghanistan’s regression in terms of how women are treated:

- Honour crimes are increasing (47 documented murders in 2005 and 20 in 2006 to date with estimates of unreported cases as high as 5,000). These are usually committed by male family members often with the implicit support of community leaders.
- There are few programmes addressing domestic violence. In particular, there are no known projects or programmes at all in Southern Afghanistan.
- 57% of girls are married before the age of 16. Some are married as young as 6 years old. Many girls, if not married, are betrothed without their consent and sometimes without their knowledge.
- Self-immolation cases rose dramatically since 2003, particularly in Western Afghanistan, largely as a result of abusive and forced marriages imposed on women.
- For the last 20 years, few marriages have been registered with the courts and women are never provided with a copy of the marriage certificate, if one exists.
- Rates of child labour have risen, and many boys and girls are forced to work as beggars or in debt bondage in brick kiln and carpet-making industries.
- High rates of rape have been reported among Hazara women in the Central Highlands of Afghanistan, carried out by factional commanders and affiliates. At least 50 Hazara families have fled to Kabul as a result of the threat of rape.
- Rape has been used against Pashtun women as a weapon of ethnic reprisals after the fall of the (Pashtun-dominated) Taliban regime, particularly in Northern Afghanistan.
There is currently only one woman cabinet member in Karzai’s government (the Minister of Women’s Affairs). This has fallen from three women in the 2004 cabinet. Even then, no powerful positions were held by women.

In 2006, there was talk of a bill to be presented to the Afghan parliament which would require women MPs to be accompanied by a male chaperone when travelling within or outside Afghanistan, which would severely restrict women’s freedom of movement, and discriminate between male and female MPs.


This report presents the findings of a nationwide public opinion poll conducted in Afghanistan regarding the national elections which were to be held in October 2004. Some of the main findings related to women are below:

- The problems facing Afghan women are widely recognized by both men and women, and of these the main ones are lack of power and lack of education. 49% of women cited reasons relating a lack of power as the biggest problems facing Afghan women. The second biggest was lack of access to services and income-generating opportunities (41%) (pp. 60-62).
- 87% of Afghans believed that women would need the permission of husbands or fathers to vote in the coming elections. The survey found that between one in five and one in three women may not have been allowed to vote (pp.63-65).

  http://iwpr.net/?p=arr&s=f&o=152863&apc_state=heniarr2004

This article refers to provincial disparities in the voter turnout of women in the 2004 Afghan presidential elections. It cites Sadiq Mudabir, an official at the Afghan election commission secretariat, who stated that voter education and local customs contributed to the high turnout of women in some provinces and that religious issues and gender discrimination were the basis of poor turnout in others. The Joint Electoral Management Body has produced a map which offers a breakdown of voter turnout by province and gender. It shows that the while women outnumbered men in Daikundi (53%) and Faryab (52%), turnout in Uruzgan and Helmand provinces was much lower, at 2% and 7% respectively. The map can be accessed using the following link:
  http://www.elections-afghanistan.org.af/Election%20Results%20Website/english/english.htm

Policies and Institutions

- UNIFEM Afghanistan Fact Sheet, May 2007
  http://www.unama-afg.org/docs/ UN-Docs_/ fact-sheets/07mayUNIFEM-fact-sheet.pdf

This fact sheet contains information about the various international and national policies relevant to gender that the Afghan government’s committed to, as well as their key provisions or purpose. The policies are listed as follows:

- Interim Afghanistan Development Strategy 2006
- Afghanistan Compact 2006
- Protocol on the Elimination of Forced and Child Marriage 2005
- Inter-ministerial Commission on the Elimination of Violence Against Women 2005
- Afghanistan Constitution 2004
- The Millennium Declaration 2004
- Bonn Agreement 2001

This webpage includes information about the goals and strategies of the Afghan government on gender equality and mainstreaming.


  

The ANDS is currently undergoing consultation at the national and sub-national levels and will be approved in 2008. This document outlines the gender-related goals of the Strategy, and expected activities and outcomes of its implementation.

**Interim Afghanistan National Development Strategy 2006**

  

This overall strategy for development in Afghanistan proposes a coherent strategy across three interdependent pillars: (1) security (2) governance, rule of law, and human rights and (3) economic and social development. In addition it considers five cross-cutting themes of which gender equity is one. Page 21 includes a description of the government’s benchmarks for this priority, government constraints in mainstreaming gender-responsive approaches and strategies and programmes to overcome these.

**Afghan Constitution 2004**

  
  Page 82-83 of this report provides a table on the key clauses on women in the new Constitution as well as critical commentary on the steps needed to make them effective.

**The Way Ahead – The Workplan of the Afghan Government (part of the Berlin Declaration), April 2004**

  

The workplan was one of the outcomes of the 2005 Berlin Conference and this report describes the activities undertaken by the Ministry of Women’s Affairs in accordance with its provisions.

**Government institutions**

  

This paper offers a description and commentary on the various institution-building and policy-making initiatives on gender under the 2001 Bonn Agreement. These are:

- The Ministry of Women’s Affairs (MOWA): established in 2002 as the first national institution for the advancement of women in Afghanistan. Its mandate is to mainstream gender throughout government policies and programmes.
- The Office of the State Minister for Women (OSMOW): also established in 2002, reporting directly to the President, to provide policy guidance with particular reference to the legislative and judicial reform processes.
➢ The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC): its mandate is to promote and protect human rights; it is also tasked with the protection and advancement of women’s rights.

➢ A Gender Advisory Group made up of ministerial staff, donors, UN agencies and civil society actors: established to assist with gender mainstreaming, as a donor–government co-ordination body, through the consultative group mechanism.

*International Instruments*


  Section 10 (p.39 onwards) of this report details the international human rights treaties that Afghanistan is a party to and the obligations that these impose.

- Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)


  Section 4 of this report discusses the obligations that ratification of the CEDAW imposes on the Afghan government. Its key responsibilities are:

  - to take comprehensive measures to combat violence against women, whether the perpetrators are family members, state officials or members of armed groups. These measures should include criminal sanctions. Appropriate protective and support services for victims and gender-sensitive training of judicial and law enforcement officers should also be considered.
  - to ensure the equality of men and women with regard to marriage and divorce.
  - to ensure that marriage is entered into only with free and full consent of both parties.
  - to consider the marriage of children as illegal.
  - to specify a minimum age for marriage and to make registration of marriages in an official registry compulsory.
  - to enact appropriate legislation and other measures to prohibit discrimination against women. This may include special provision to ensure increased numbers of women are brought into public life and decision making, including law enforcement and judicial bodies.

*Messages and Statements*

In the last three years, there appear to have been few top-level statements made which address the issue of gender in Afghanistan. Much of the material that is available consists usually of brief condemnations of recent crimes against women and girls, such as abductions, killings and the burning of schools, etc. I have therefore included below more in-depth statements from a range of actors:

*Presidential statements*

- Agence France Presse (AFP), ‘Afghan President, UN Speak Out After Girls’ School Attack’, 13 June 2007

- Office of the Spokesman to the President, ‘President Karzai Congratulates Women on International Women’s Day – Excerpts from President’s Speech’, 8 March 2005

- Daily Times, ‘Karzai Calls for End to Injustices Against Women’, 12 May 2004
Other

  http://www.afghanwomensnetwork.org/index.php?q=node/299


- Women Living Under Muslim Laws, ‘Statement on Afghanistan visit by UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women’, 18 July 2005


- United National Assistance Mission for Afghanistan, ‘Statement of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Afghanistan on the Occasion of International Women’s Day’, 8 March 2004

- US Department of State, ‘Statement to the USAID by Paula Dobriansky, Under Secretary for Global Affairs, US Department of State, to Commemorate Women’s History Month’, 11 March 2004
  http://www.state.gov/g/wi/30639.htm

3. Additional information

Author
This query response was prepared by Seema Khan: seema@gsdrc.org

Contributors
Cheryl Benard, RAND Corporation
Sippi Azerbaijani-Moghaddam, Independent Consultant
Ernie Valdeavilla, UNDP
Erna Andersen, AREU
Andrew McDevitt, GSDRC
Anna Wordsworth, AREU
Alice Kerr-Wilson, Social Development Direct

Websites visited
About Helpdesk research reports: Helpdesk reports are based on two days of desk-based research. They are designed to provide a brief overview of the key issues; and a summary of some of the best literature available. Experts are contacted during the course of the research, and those able to provide input within the short time-frame are acknowledged.

Need help finding consultants?
If you need to commission more in-depth research, or need help finding and contracting consultants for additional work, please contact consultants@gsdrc.org (further details at www.gsdrc.org/go.cfm?path=/go/helpdesk/find-a-consultant&).