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## After Over a Decade of Occupation and \$1.5 Billion in US Aid, the Reality Facing Women in Afghanistan Has Barely Changed

Jodie Evans and Amie Ferris-Rotman

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**The reality is light years from pledges and public statements made by high-ranking Afghan and American officials.**

The fate of women in Afghanistan has been the moral linchpin for the continued occupation by U.S. and NATO forces since the presidency of George W. Bush. But according to experts and women across the war-torn country, little has changed for women there despite upwards of \$1.5 billion spent to empower women and girls.

Instead, a deeply misogynist culture and ruling class endure in spite of ongoing pledges from political leaders to Western audiences promising progress. Instead, whenever violence worsens, the government's tepid efforts to pressure social conservatives to respect rights and expand opportunities for women are set aside as military alliances and political responses take precedence.

This is not to say that more than a decade of work by social reformers inside and outside the country have come to naught, but it shows how deeply entrenched cultural and political resistance remain. The West has helped Afghanistan to expand and improve maternal health care, as well as open up schools that girls can attend in urban and rural areas. But as Nimmi Gowrinathan, a visiting professor at City College in New York, said of educating girls, "That's the reality until the sixth grade, when they get married."



To understand what women face in Afghanistan, you need first to look at what unfolds on the streets -- even in the supposedly more modern capital, Kabul -- and then contrast that with the pledges on paper, public statements and lip service by high-ranking Afghan and American officials.

### **Part 1: Farkhunda's Shadow**

In March of 2015, in the lead-up to celebrations for Nowruz, the Afghan New Year, a monstrous act of cruelty took place in the center of Kabul. Farkhunda, a 27-year-old Islamic student, was brutally murdered by an all-male mob numbering in the hundreds not far from the Shah-e Du Shamshira mosque, considered one of the holiest sites in the country. Her murder became a turning point in the charting of violence against women in Afghanistan, sparking unprecedented protests and bringing the critical issue of women's rights to the foreground in ways before unforeseen.

When the deeply religious Farkhunda -- she has been remembered by her first name -- reprimanded an amulet-seller for being un-Islamic, he replied by yelling, in remarks caught on tape, "This woman is an American and she has burnt the Koran!" Soon an angry crowd formed around her, where they proceeded to kick and beat her, throw stones at her, drag her for more than 200 yards down the road and run her over with a car before finally setting her mutilated and bloodied body on fire on the banks of the Kabul River. All of this was carried out to jubilant cheers from hundreds of men, some of whom filmed the carnage on their mobile phones before posting it on social media, where the murder was widely shared. As the footage shows, the more

Farkhunda was beaten, the more the men would victoriously punch their fists into the air, crying, "Kill her!"

Throughout the U.S.-led war, there were instances of Afghan women who were publicly executed, often at the behest of Taliban courts. But the palpable zeal within which the men killed Farkhunda shocked many Afghans. After all, this had taken place in the capital, Kabul, the place considered the most progressive in terms of women's rights. This was the place where the most money had been spent on improving the lives of women. The murder felt symbolic; it became proof of how violence was intrinsic to Afghan women's lives, and how little the situation had changed during the war. The demographics of the male perpetrators were noteworthy. "These were children under [former President] Karzai, and now they are young men," women's rights activist Sahra Mosawi told the BBC in a film released in August. "They were wearing modern clothes ... But their attitudes are still outdated."

In the days following Farkhunda's murder, thousands of women and men took to the streets in protest, chanting "We are all Farkhunda!" Some women smeared their faces with red paint in the image of Farkhunda, whose bloodied face was broadcast around the globe. Fiercely breaking with Afghan tradition, women, including Mosawi, carried Farkhunda's coffin through the streets, preventing men from touching it. President Ashraf Ghani met Farkhunda's family, embracing her sobbing father Mohammad, and an unusually swift trial took place. Eleven police officers and eight civilians were given prison terms, while four men were handed down death sentences. The sentences were viewed by rights workers as victories.

But, in hearings behind closed doors, Afghanistan's Appeals Court released the policemen on bail and quashed the death sentences. Women's rights activists in Afghanistan, along with Farkhunda's family, strongly condemned the legal turnaround. "After Farkhunda, I feel unsafe here," prominent activist Samira Hamidi, former director of the Afghan Women's Network, told me by telephone from Kabul. "The systems failed her. Any man can do whatever he likes towards any woman. They can kill her, wrongly accuse her of crimes, they can set her on fire. In terms of the police, in terms of justice, what we see with Farkhunda is one big failure."

According to Gowrinathan, Farkhunda's brutal murder was an example of how the West's approach to women in Afghanistan was a misconception from the start, involving "a gun in one hand, aid in the other."

"These women are told, 'Go to school and then anything is possible,' but that is simply not the case," she said. "The West should have looked at the politics of women, the domestic violence, the sexual violence, and evaluated how this affects their paths in daily life."

### **The Killing In Context**

Violence against Afghan women is epidemic. A major 2008 report by the NGO Global Rights found that 87 percent of Afghan women had experienced domestic violence in their lifetimes. In the Taliban strongholds of Kandahar and Helmand, the figure was over 90 percent. In tiny Khost province on the border with Pakistan, over 97 percent of women reported suffering violence.

The world was shocked in 2009 when a 21-year-old rape victim called Gulnaz was forced to marry her rapist. She was initially jailed on the charge of adultery after her cousin's husband raped and impregnated her. An Afghan court decided that she could go free when she married her attacker, which she agreed to do after government pressure. She is now pregnant with their third child. "I cut relations with my family only to buy my daughter's future," she said in April 2015.

Examples of violence and cruelty towards women abound. Two that CODEPINK encountered involve a young woman named Muzhgan and a 15-year-old called Tamana. Tamana was beaten and killed by her cousin, whom she had been forced to marry a few months earlier. As in most cases of violence against women, the perpetrators were not brought to justice. For Muzhgan Masoomi, life as she knew it ended abruptly one afternoon when she was returning home from her work as a financial assistant at a government ministry in Kabul. Her attacker -- another male relative -- pulled her onto the family home's front path, where he stabbed her 14 times with a butcher knife. Miraculously, she survived -- but with a limp and no control over her bladder. She said her assailant disapproved of women working outside the home.

After years of political wrangling and setbacks, former President Karzai finally passed the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) law in 2009. Though hailed as a groundbreaking achievement, it is rarely enforced. Some lawmakers, like Fawzia Koofi, want the law passed through parliament as well, which she believes will make it more permanent (many major Afghan laws are in place by presidential decree but did not go through parliament). In the final years of Karzai's tenure the government, in increasing deference to the Taliban, deliberately rolled back women's rights, including reducing the number of women in provincial councils and a proposal to bring back stoning as a punishment for female adulterers. Luckily, thanks to global outcry from Western governments and NGOs, that law didn't pass, but the sentiment remains.



In March of 2015, ahead of the country's new president, Ashraf Ghani, meeting with President Obama in Washington, Human Rights Watch urged the U.S. president to enforce the EVAW law. Citing Afghanistan's police force as the key barrier to implementing the law, the New York-based rights group said foreign donors, especially the United States, should tie their funding of the police to preventing violence against women. "Even if it (EVAW) did pass through parliament, it doesn't mean the government has any intention of implementing it," Heather Barr, senior researcher on women's rights in Asia, told CODEPINK.

## **Violence Against Women And War Endure**

Though it is difficult to measure, violence against women isn't going away and may be rising. Cases of violence against women peaked in 2014, reaching 2,000 for the first seven months of the year, according to the Ministry of Women's Affairs. This compares to 2013, which recorded more than 5,400 cases, and 2012, which had more than 4,500.

Some say violence is not necessarily increasing, but that more women are reporting it as they have become more aware of their rights, but others, such as Gowrinathan, says this is a direct result of the militarization of society. Gowrinathan, who researches the impact of militarization on women, said that the more troops on the ground, the greater the risks for women. "Naturally, when you have an increase in the militarization, the intrusion of the military increases into the most civic and intimate spaces of life, which is usually where the women are," she told CODEPINK. An increased army presence adds "a layer of vulnerability to the women," she said.

In 2012, the United Nations issued a major report called "Still A Long Way To Go" detailing 71 recommendations to the government to implement the EVAW. But in December 2013, the U.N. found that only four had been put into place, with 20 more partially in place. In 2013, Sima Samar, the head of the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, said the brutality of the violence was actually intensifying, describing a horrific year in which women experienced "cutting (of) the nose, lips and ears" and public rapes.

Paradoxically, President Obama's troop surge in Afghanistan led to more violence, especially for women. In December 2009, Obama ordered 30,000 additional U.S. troops to Afghanistan, taking the U.S. total to around 100,000 soldiers. The new troops moved in by the middle of 2010, almost two years before the U.S. drawdown began.

Controversial night raids, which were a key part of the U.S. military's approach to searching for insurgents, involved mostly male American soldiers going into the private sphere of Afghan families' homes, including into rooms where women slept. Many Afghans found night raids to be culturally offensive in their treatment of women, arguing that they dishonored them (in contemporary Afghan society, most women cannot speak to most men, unless they are relatives or a husband). Women's ire has been captured in landays, oral two-line poems that Pashtun women create. In a collection of landays published in 2014, one reads: "May God destroy the White House and Kill the Man/who sent U.S. cruise missiles to burn my homeland."

In 2010, leading aid agencies, including Oxfam, warned of the dangers of the militarization of aid, arguing that the use of non-lethal aid puts more Afghan civilians at risk than not. Though well-intentioned, such aid means more ordinary people are placed on the front lines of the war -- where they build schools and work in clinics affiliated with foreign militaries -- therefore becoming targets for insurgent groups. According to a 2011 Boston University paper on civilian casualties in Afghanistan, the militarization has also led to indirect deaths. "Indirect deaths, due to the effects of increased malnutrition, lack of access to safe drinking water and medicine, and disease that would otherwise not be fatal, occur at some ratio to direct deaths."

The longer the war in Afghanistan drags on, the higher the civilian death toll. The United Nations said in a report that 2014 was the deadliest year on record for Afghan civilians during the U.S.-led war, with 3,699 deaths and 6,849 injured. Previously the hardest-hit year was 2011, at the peak of the U.S. military surge, when civilian deaths exceeded 3,000. In 2011, the U.N. found that 166 women and 306 children were killed, increases of 29 and 51 percent respectively over the year before. The vast majority of casualties in Afghanistan are caused by insurgent attacks. Children bore the brunt in 2014: 718 were killed, an increase of 40 percent on the last year. Almost 300 killed were women, with 611 injured. For women whose husbands were killed or maimed, their lives looked to significantly worsen. The U.N. report found that "women who were left as sole income-providers for their households faced poverty, forcing many women to give their daughters in marriage in exchange for debts. ... Widowed women were particularly vulnerable to forms of violence from family and community members."

## **Part 2: Political Myths, Lip Service and Reality**

When Afghan President Ashraf Ghani took office in September 2014, he surprised the world by including the importance of women's rights in his inauguration speech. His wife Rula, a Lebanese Christian who converted to Islam, stood by his side, draped in a black headscarf and red-cuffed jacket. She, too, has been outspoken in her dismay at the appalling state of rights for Afghan women more than a decade after the U.S.-led invasion, even going so far as to express her dislike of the head-to-toe burqa.

Ghani's words were in stark contrast to what we became used to hearing from his predecessor Hamid Karzai, who became increasingly unsympathetic towards women's rights in his nearly 13 years of power. (When Karzai stepped down, he used his farewell speech to denounce the United States, blaming Washington for betrayal and a long war against the Taliban. His wife, Zinat, had a ghostlike, hidden existence throughout his presidency.)

U.S.-backed forces overthrew the Taliban in 2001, sparking a protracted, bloody war that was often framed as being driven by the need to protect Afghanistan's women. In November 2001, First Lady Laura Bush gave a speech to the nation insisting that the war on terrorism was a "fight for the rights and dignity of women." After her speech, the State Department released a report on the Taliban's "War Against Women." The speech and report were aimed at garnering greater public support for the ensuing invasion.

Americans' enthusiasm for military action in Afghanistan waned over the years, coinciding with a rise in both Afghan and U.S. military deaths. (Since 2001, an estimated 92,000 people have died, including 26,000 Afghan civilians; there have been almost 3,500 coalition deaths, the vast majority of them American). As the years went by, the United States talked less about the reason Washington invaded Afghanistan in the first place, which was because Afghanistan had provided a safe haven for al-Qaida.

Looking back at President George W. Bush's speeches on Afghanistan, the initial emphasis on terrorism was soon eclipsed by women's rights. "Under the Taliban, women were oppressed, their potential was ignored. Under President Karzai's leadership, that has changed dramatically," Bush told a press briefing in 2004 in Washington, D.C. In 2011, he was beating the same drum:



"The idea of liberating women, empowering women, encouraging women, educating women in Afghanistan is all part of laying a foundation for lasting peace," he told Fox News.

### **The Moral Linchpin**

President Obama often jests that he is surrounded by women, both in his personal life -- his wife Michelle, two daughters and mother-in-law -- and in his work: between 2009 and 2013, he worked closely with Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and he has many female advisors. He created the White House Council on Women and Girls, and in 2013 he signed a memorandum directing the Secretary of State to coordinate efforts to empower women and girls internationally.

But despite this, women's rights activists have been left bewildered. Neither he nor Michelle Obama have used their status to significantly address the needs of women in Afghanistan. In 2011, a senior U.S. official was quoted by the Washington Post as saying that the Obama administration, eager to end the conflict, would push gender issues aside: "There's no way we can be successful if we maintain every special interest and pet project. All those pet rocks in our rucksack were taking us down." But in March 2015, when Obama met Ghani in the White House, he said, "America will continue to be your partner in advancing the rights and dignity of all Afghans, including women and girls."

Discussing the merits of the war is often framed within the context of toppling the brutal Taliban and freeing the country's women. Barometers of this success include women officially regaining basic rights in education, employment and voting. CODEPINK has estimated that between 2003 and 2013, at least \$1.5 billion was allocated by the U.S. government's various agencies for Afghan women and girls. This compares to the more than \$1 trillion spent on the war in total, most of which went to the U.S. military and training of Afghanistan's defense forces. Reconstruction projects claimed at least \$110 billion.

But have the lives of Afghan women really improved? "After all these efforts, the huge amount of money spent, the creation of women's organizations, the so-called community-level support, we are in a situation where most women still don't know their basic rights," said Samira Hamidi, "The help for women has been in the bigger cities, where there are fewer cultural barriers. In rural areas, nothing has changed. Women are still imprisoned in their homes," Hamidi said by telephone from Kabul.

Despite spending at least \$1.5 billion on empowering Afghan women, the country is still viewed as one of the worst in the world for women. According to the U.N., only 17 percent of Afghan women can read and write; access to health care is limited, and almost impossible in remote areas; and domestic violence is rife, with limited chances for recourse or legal protection.

According to the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR), there is no way to tell if the U.S. funding for Afghan women even made an impact. The Defense Department, State Department and USAID all had programs to support Afghan women. "SIGAR found that the full extent of the agencies' efforts to support Afghan women was unclear," the watchdog said in an alarming report released in December of 2014, the same month the United States formally ended the war.

Addressing the nearly \$1 billion spent between 2011 and 2013, SIGAR continued, "We found that DOD, State, and USAID had difficulties producing comprehensive lists of their projects, programs, and initiatives, and funding supporting Afghan women because they lacked effective mechanisms for tracking these efforts and the associated funding." SIGAR outlined three recommendations for the three agencies: implementing mechanisms to track projects that fund Afghan women, using existing monitoring to conduct agency-wide assessments and establishing timeframes for these evaluations.

"You would think, that for such an important issue, which is such an important goal for the United States -- to improve the lives of Afghan women -- they (the government) couldn't even tell us how much money they were spending and which programs had been created for women," Inspector General John Sopko told CODEPINK in an interview in September 2015.

"USAID told us all their programs help women. They couldn't even tell us, full out, which programs were dedicated to women. We repeatedly asked them for information," Sopko added.

In response to a draft of the report, the Department of Defense said it "partially concurred" with the findings, while USAID and the State Department balked at them. In joint comments, they "respectfully requested" that the first and third recommendations be removed, and said the need for agency-wide assessments would not "add value."

The need to track success is crucial. "Since the U.S. left Afghanistan, we're not in a position to stand on one's own legs. If we stay like this, in limbo, we won't be able to achieve much for women," Sahira Sharif, a member of parliament for eastern Khost province, said in London in July 2015. "Perhaps the U.S. and foreign involvement was beneficial for some places, but the impact on common, uneducated people, especially women and children, was very negative," she added, noting that life barely changed at all.

The main criticism of U.S. involvement and spending in Afghanistan has centered on the fact that while life may have improved for women in larger cities, those in its sprawling, remote countryside feel no different. The rural-urban divide and its impact on women is not new, nor is it unique to Afghanistan. Throughout the twentieth century, Afghanistan's gender policy swung like a pendulum, repeatedly giving, and then taking away, women's liberties.

In the 1920s, the dynamic King Amanullah and his wife Queen Soraya (who famously tore off her headscarf in public) became heavily influenced by the politics of Turkey's great modernizer, Mustafa Ataturk. Amanullah painstakingly opened schools for girls, and women were encouraged to work. When Amanullah was overthrown in a coup by Habibullah Kalakani in 1929, one of the very first things the illiterate bandit did was order the closure of girls' schools. The monarchy was restored later that year, with King Mohammed Nadir Shah in place. He was replaced by King Mohammed Zahir Shah, who ruled for four decades, overseeing vast improvements for women. The 1950s saw the arrival of the first Afghan female doctors, followed by mass literacy campaigns.

But with Moscow's invasion in 1979, the Soviet war that ensued and the devastating civil war of the early 1990s, women became increasingly excluded from the public sphere. After the ousting



of the Red Army, it was the U.S.-backed mujahideen who first banned women from working outside the home. Later, the Taliban, which seized Kabul in 1996, took further steps, essentially making it a crime to be born female: women and girls were banned from education and employment, denied voting rights and forced to wear the head-to-toe burqa if venturing outside. In rural areas today, employment, studying, publicly speaking and leaving the house alone -- while not banned as they were under the Taliban -- remain in place for many women, unspoken rules of a deeply conservative society.

In the continued American effort to try to advance the rights of women, USAID has earmarked \$416 million for 2015-2020 in its program Promote, the largest of its kind for gender development in Afghanistan. It is aimed at bolstering women's advancement in government, civil society and the private sector. But Promote has already attracted doubt and raised serious questions. In April, SIGAR expressed its concern, saying there are still no methods in place to ensure the money reaches the women it is meant to help.

For activist Samira Hamidi, Promote is another ill-conceived American plan that does not help the majority of Afghan women, as it does not branch out to cover the areas most in need. "Just look at the areas of focus: Promote is for the same five areas that have received support for the last 14 years!" Hamidi said, referring to Kabul, Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif and other urban areas of Balkh province, Nangarhar and Kandahar.

### **Part 3: A Seat or Empty Chair at the Political Table?**

In the political world, there is often a long distance between words on a page and realities on the ground.

In December 2011, the Obama White House issued the National Action Plan for Women, Peace and Security, in line with implementing U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325, which calls for an increase in women's participation in peace efforts and to strengthen the protection of women in armed conflict. Though the White House's NAP was global in nature, Afghanistan was understood to be one of its main targets.

"In order to secure Afghanistan's long-term stability and development, we will continue to work with the international community and Afghan civil society to help ensure women participate at all levels of decision-making and governance," it said. Though there was no mention of the amount of funding spent towards peace efforts, let alone in Afghanistan, one sentence -- a promise -- is particularly glaring: "There is no question that the women of Afghanistan still must travel a long road before they achieve full equality. We are committed to supporting their entire journey."



In April 2015, the State Department issued a review of the NAP's implementation. Afghanistan, again, was seen as a primary target. Successes are outlined, whereby the State Department is described as having "developed deliberate multi-track approaches to strengthening the active participation of women in conflict resolution and peace building, especially in Afghanistan, Burma, Sudan and South Sudan."

But Afghan women have been conspicuously absent from peace talks. In a major report on Afghan women's rights issued in November 2014, the aid agency Oxfam found that there had been 23 rounds of peace talks held since 2005 between the Afghan government, the international community and the Taliban. Oxfam found that there were zero women present at talks between the international community and the Taliban, and in talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban, there was one female official present during two rounds of talks.

"It's not clear what the government's plans for reconciliation are. There doesn't seem to be an approach for including more women in there beyond the rhetoric," Liz Cameron, of the Asia Foundation in Kabul, told CODEPINK. In late June 2015, President Ghani said that the role of women in any peace talks will be real and not a formality. This would be in line with Afghanistan's constitution, considered one of the most balanced for the two genders in the Muslim world. It states: "The citizens of Afghanistan, man and woman, have equal rights before the law." On July 8, 2015, a State Department spokesman said, in reference to peace talks: "We also want to see (the Taliban) accept the Afghan constitution, including its protections for women and minorities."

A large delegation of around 12 Afghan women, including prominent members of parliament Shukria Barakzai and Fawzia Koofi, met with members of the Taliban in Oslo in June 2015 for peace talks. The Taliban described the talks as "informal," and the Afghan government said the women were not there in an official capacity. The female delegates made it clear that their rights must be protected in any future power-sharing deal. Barakzai, who survived a targeted insurgent suicide bomb attack in Kabul in 2014, described the meeting as "historic." Paradoxically, it

seems that these talks proved more successful in giving women a seat at the negotiating table than government efforts.

"Such direct dialogues will increase the chances of rational discussions and hopefully convince the Taliban to preserve women's rights," said the Afghan analyst and historian Helena Malikyar. A co-founder of the civil society organization The Afghan Women's Charter, Malikyar held meetings with President Ghani and Chief Executive Officer Abdullah Abdullah where she demanded that women be included in negotiations and that their rights be secured.

### **Still on the Political Margins**

But peace talks, for the most part, have been shrouded in mystery. Always conducted in private, in various locations such as Qatar and Pakistan, they are often announced to the public only after they've concluded. "This has prevented Afghan civil society groups, including women's rights activists, from providing meaningful input to the government on their human rights protections in the event a settlement is reached," said Human Rights Watch in February 2015, in an appeal to the Afghan government urging it not leave women out of peace talks.

This past July 7, the Pakistani government hosted a four-hour meeting between the Afghan government and representatives from the Taliban near the capital, Islamabad. Representatives from the United States and China supervised the talks. The Afghan government hailed the meeting as the first of its kind between the two sides; before, Taliban members had rejected formally negotiating with a government it did not recognize. The U.S. government, which has encouraged Ghani's government to speak to the Taliban, praised the talks as "an important step in advancing prospects for credible peace," White House press secretary Josh Earnest said afterwards. Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif hailed the talks as "a major breakthrough." But of the small delegation of Afghan officials from the country's High Peace Council -- which included Hekmat Karzai, a nephew of the ex-president and Afghanistan's deputy foreign minister -- no women were present.

Afghanistan's High Peace Council, developed by Karzai in 2010 to negotiate peace with the Taliban, has some 70 members, of whom nine are female. Female members have complained that their presence is tokenistic, and they are not consulted for major discussions. Oxfam, along with Afghan NGOs such as the Afghan Women's Network, have urged the government to increase women's participation to at least 30 percent on the council. The country also has provincial peace councils, located in each of Afghanistan's 34 provinces. Women representing the majority of those councils have asked the government to increase female participation to at least 25 percent, though those demands have not been met.

Ghani has been vocal in the need to include Afghan women in peace talks, but action has yet to materialize. Women made up a small part of Ghani's delegations on his first trips abroad to nearby China and Pakistan, which were described as informal attempts to revive peace talks with the Taliban. "Even though Ghani and Abdullah do believe in women's rights, we must prevent them from giving in to their political allies," Malikyar said, adding that "the U.S. also needs to be pressured to insist on women's rights and not compromise them for the sake of political or

military expediency." Human Rights Watch has also stressed that international donors only hand over funding once female participation in peace talks is guaranteed.

Adding more complications to an already delicate situation, the government announcement on July 29 that the head of the Afghan Taliban, Mullah Omar, died two years ago has only delayed peace talks. Pakistan's Foreign Ministry had said they would resume after the holy month of Ramadan, which ended in late July. But after the Afghan Taliban announced Mullah Omar's replacement would be his long-time deputy Mullah Akhtar Mohammad Mansour, the Pakistani foreign ministry said talks would be put on hold, throwing the fledgling peace talks into further shambles.

#### **Part 4: Education and Girls' Schooling**

Meanwhile, back on the ground in Afghanistan, one consequence of the U.S.-led intervention of the country since the Bush administration has been the re-establishment of schools for girls, particularly at the grade school level. But here again there is much more to that apparent accomplishment than meets the eye.

Groups of Afghan schoolgirls, garbed in their black uniforms and white hijabs, have become symbolic of the intervention. When talking about their achievements in the country, Western leaders often point to the strides made in education: the brutal regime of the Taliban had banned girls from school. Since 2001, international donors have committed \$1.9 billion to building Afghanistan's education system. When they were toppled in November 2001, zero girls were in formal education. Today, more than one third of Afghan enrollment is female.

For the United States, this was always part of the agenda. Laura Bush, herself a former schoolteacher, visited Afghanistan three times during her 2001-2009 tenure as first lady to support educational projects. A stalwart supporter of female literacy, she kept up the pressure, even after her husband's two terms as president. In 2013, in an editorial in the Washington Post, she said: "Twelve years ago this week, the Taliban regime retreated from Kabul ... Women emerged from behind their burqa and girls could again dream of going to school."

The United States has spent more than \$1 billion on education in Afghanistan, and has touted it as a premier success story. Afghanistan's constitution guarantees women both the right to an education and to employment. Attention was placed on attracting girls into formal education, and their attendance was -- and is -- often held up as justification for the war. But a major investigation by BuzzFeed, released in July 2015, found female enrollment had been overstated by an average of 40 percent at U.S.-funded schools in Afghanistan. The investigation, based on visits to 50 U.S.-funded schools, internal U.S. and Afghan documents and more than 150 interviews, also found faulty construction and widespread corruption. At least a tenth of the schools were "ghosts," meaning they were either closed or never existed in the first place.

Almost \$770 million, to date, was funneled through USAID, which says it spent the funding on building schools, training teachers and building the Afghan Ministry of Education. USAID proudly states on its site that of the 8 million schoolchildren enrolled today, 2.5 million are girls. In a July 2014 fact sheet, USAID wrote, "Women and girls attend school more often when they

do not have to travel long, sometimes dangerous distances, making easy access to schools an important priority. Between 2006 and 2011, USAID assistance to community-based education enabled approximately 105,000 students (more than 65% female) in remote villages to attend school."

Larry Sampler, assistant to the director of USAID's Office of Afghanistan and Pakistan Affairs, responded to the BuzzFeed investigation, saying it was "not representative of USAID's work on education in Afghanistan, or even our work on school construction." While BuzzFeed found U.S.-funded schools in the capital, Kabul, and other cities, functioning well, with many female students, the situation in the rural parts of the country told a different story. BuzzFeed visited a school where girls were only receiving religious education, and another where there were no girls at all, despite USAID records saying there were female students.

SIGAR asked USAID in June 2015 to respond to a series of questions about how it is investigating whether Afghan officials lied to the agency about the "ghost" schools, saying such allegations "call for immediate action." Sampler replied, saying USAID is working with the Afghan Ministry of Education on making its data more reliable. The figures that USAID uses and measures as a barometer of its success in education come from the Ministry, and are not independently evaluated.

"The problem with Western money is that it went to corrupt people who lied about what they did with it," said Dr. Sakena Yacoobi. After setting up a network of underground schools for girls during the Taliban, Dr. Yacoobi founded the Afghan Institute of Learning, an educational NGO. "The West did not monitor whom they were giving the money to," Dr. Yacoobi told CODEPINK. She pointed to various successes made in urban areas, but reiterated a common Afghan complaint that education -- particularly access to schooling for girls -- was still limited in rural areas. "We needed to open schools in the rural areas, and they did not. And this breaks my heart," she said.

Afghanistan's literacy rates are among the worst in the world. In 2014, UNESCO found that 18 percent of adult women were able to read and write, while over half -- 52 percent -- of Afghan adult men were literate. (These figures vary greatly: the Central Intelligence Agency's Factbook estimates that adult female literacy in Afghanistan will reach 24.2 per cent in 2015.) Compared with its neighbors, female enrollment in school remains very low: Iran boasts over 90 percent, Pakistan 62 percent.

With mounting donor fatigue, there are also serious concerns over maintaining the fragile gains made in girls' education. "This is not a short-term project; it is a long-term project. This is not something that happens overnight," said Dr. Yacoobi. Referring to the Washington's education policy in Afghanistan, she added: "Do not go somewhere, start something, destroy it and then walk out."

In a major 2011 report by Care International, poverty was found to be the key obstacle to girls' education, with some 41 percent of people interviewed saying this was the main barrier (Care interviewed 630 parents, 332 teachers and 687 school-age girls across the country). Linked with this are forced marriages, which take girls out of school. The number of female teacher also is



insufficient -- Afghanistan's strict gender segregation means they must be employed in girls' schools -- and some 26 percent of those surveyed saying this was the reason they did not pursue education. Lack of a physical building (many schools operate outside) as well as having to travel a long way to school also contributed heavily to hampering girls' education. Particularly worrying is maintaining female attendance.

While Western donors pat themselves on the back for putting more than 2 million Afghan girls in school, the figures on how many regularly attend school, or stay in school, are hazy. According to Care, data from the Ministry of Education keeps students on enrollment lists for up to three years, even if they are absent. In 2009, 22 percent -- some 446,682 girls -- were temporarily or permanently absent from school (this compared to 11 per cent of boys). "The Western obsession with girls' schooling drives me mad," said Gowrinathan.

## **Part 5: Health Care: A Truer Success Story?**

Even those least supportive of the U.S.-led war in Afghanistan agree that vast improvements have been made in the sphere of health -- despite some degree of corruption and theft of international aid funds.

Though not celebrated nearly as much as girls' schooling, Afghan women and children -- the main beneficiaries of better health care -- have enjoyed serious, positive change. In 2003, prenatal care covered a mere 6 percent of women; a decade later, this shot up to 39 percent, according to figures from the World Bank. The maternal mortality rate -- meaning the number of women who die in childbirth or in the days following it -- jumped down from 1,600 women in 100,000 births, in the year 2000, to 327 in 2010. Many Afghans today have access to some form of primary healthcare.

In 2002, there were only 496 health facilities across the country; in 2013, there were over 2,300. Around three-quarters of these have at least one female member of staff, necessary in a country where the genders are kept largely segregated. In 2012, the country ceased being the worst place on Earth to be a mother, according to the NGO Save The Children. Afghanistan had switched places with Niger in western Africa, which fell back to bottom place. More girls in school and an increase in the number of trained professionals during births were credited for the move.

"The biggest positive impact of (foreign intervention) was with the health system," said Gowrinathan, adding, "but this wasn't due to the U.S. government, it was everyone together." The European Union, the World Bank and USAID worked jointly with the Ministry of Health to develop Afghanistan's healthcare system over the past decade. The World Health Organization supported them, as well as dozens of health NGOs. To date, the World Bank has spent at least \$190 million on health. The European Union says by 2013, it had spent 65 million euros (\$73 million) on humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, with health one of its key areas, and has plans to spend 274 million euros (\$307 million) between 2014-2020 on health and nutrition. Since 2011, the year that USAID started funding projects in Afghanistan, taking over from other U.S. government agencies, \$417.7 million has been spent on health. USAID has heralded its health spending as a triumph. "For most international groups intervening post-2011, health care



was one of the "cleaner" (US Department of State Interview 2014) points of intervention into community spaces with contentious gendered restrictions," said a draft U.N. report, obtained by CODEPINK.

USAID has a four-pronged approach to health in the country, "especially women and children," which aims to meet the immediate health needs of the Afghan people; improve the health behaviors of individuals, families and communities; increase demand for and access to quality services through the private sector; and address the long-term sustainability of the healthcare system.

### **Ghost Clinics**

The agency has come under fire recently from SIGAR over the issue of missing health clinics. USAID has said that it built 551 health clinics in Afghanistan. But when SIGAR examined the coordinates of the clinics, the location of 56 of them had "weaknesses," SIGAR explained in a June 2015 letter to USAID. Thirteen of the listed clinics were not in Afghanistan at all (one was located in the Mediterranean Sea); 30 were located in a different province from the one USAID had indicated; 13 were duplicated. For 189 of the coordinates, a physical structure could not be seen within 400 feet (81 of these showed no physical structure within a half-mile). USAID dismissed SIGAR's concerns, saying it maintains regular contact with Afghan staff and third-party members who check on the sites. Larry Sampler, an assistant to the director of USAID's Afghanistan and Pakistan Affairs department, said in a statement that, "Coordinates can help, but are not required, to locate the target community and to serve as a cross reference to USAID. It has been a common practice for Afghan ministries to use the location of a village center as the coordinates for a facility, particularly when there was limited access to GPS technology."

But while the plaudits have rolled in, the situation on the ground remains far from ideal.

"While health care is often held up as an achievement of international state-building efforts in Afghanistan, the situation is far from being a simple success story," Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders) said in an alarming report in February 2014, which details the deadly risks that people in Afghanistan must make in order to gain access to healthcare. Of the 800 Afghans interviewed for the report, 40 percent told MSF that fighting, landmines, checkpoints or harassment occurred while trying to reach a health care center. Some 20 percent said they had a family member or friend who had died in the last year due to not being able to reach a public health facility. For women, this is particularly hard: insecurity means women cannot and do not travel at night, even if they are in labor or seriously injured. In Taliban-dominated areas in the south and east of the country, taxi drivers do not want to drive at night out of fear of attacks.

For many, the issues of health and education are intertwined for Afghan children, particularly girls.

"If a child is healthy, then they can learn. If there is no security, then they get sick, and they cannot learn," Dr. Yacoobi told CODEPINK. Care International concurred in its major 2011 report: "The more time a girl spends in school, the more likely she is able to grow healthy, well-nourished and economically empowered when it comes to her well-being as well as that of her

children. The report noted that well-received studies have shown that infant mortality drops by 5 to 10 percent for every year a girl stays in school.

Mental health in Afghanistan is a largely unexplored area; after 35 years of near-continuous warfare and turmoil, the MSF believes the country has incredibly high rates of mental illness, with around 60 percent of the population suffering from psychological problems or mental health disorders. The majority of these sufferers are women.

According to the WHO, Afghans spend, on average, \$55 on health care per year, a large amount considering their average annual income is less than \$500. In 2012, it was estimated that of this, only \$10 is footed by international donors, meaning impoverished Afghans have to pay for most of their health care. The MSF report cites cases whereby women in labor and without money do not make it to a clinic in time, meaning death for the baby, the woman or both.

The MSF report also carries a stark warning about future health gains: "The research... makes it clear that the upbeat rhetoric about the gains in healthcare risks overlooking the suffering of Afghans who struggle without access to adequate medical assistance."

### **Bottom Line: Progress for Women is Slow at Best**

Like many nonprofit organizations dedicated to helping Afghanistan's women and girls, CODEPINK has spent years watching the forces in Afghan society, culture and politics wreak havoc on ordinary people's lives. The American effort to install a pro-Western government, including laws that recognize the rights of women and girls, is constantly running into cultural barriers and biases that considers misogyny normal and traditional.

While the protests that followed Farkhunda's grotesque killing suggest that some elements of Afghan society have had enough of such anti-women sentiments and religious intolerance, the reality for most Afghan women, especially in the rural countryside, has barely changed. And with a resurgent and newly militaristic Taliban, the prospects for progress in the immediate future can only be seen as grim.