



Afghanistan Policy Page

A one-page brief on a major issue concerning U.S. policy and engagement in Afghanistan.

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State of Women in Afghanistan

Take Aways

- The state of Afghan women has improved since the fall of the Taliban, however, women still face injustice, violence, and extreme health challenges.
- The engagement and inclusion of women, as a critical segment of Afghan society, is essential in supporting the current US policy of population-centric counterinsurgency.
- Conservative social norms remain prevalent in Afghanistan with profound consequences for women.
- Female political participation has increased, but women's safety and rights are not entirely protected or guaranteed.

In Quotes

"Police and judges see violence against women as legitimate, so they do not prosecute cases."

Soraya Sobhrang, Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission

Key Facts

The Afghanistan Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) is the only ministry headed by a female: Dr. Husn Banu Ghazanfar

- MoWA is responsible for implementation of political and social policy of the Afghan government in order to secure and expand legal rights of women and ensure the rule of law in their lives within its activity area.

Female representation in Parliament is 27.3%, which exceeds the constitutionally mandated minimum of 25%.

- For comparison, approximately 16% of the United States legislative branch is female.
- According to the Interparliamentary Union, Afghanistan is 32nd in the world in female representation, the US is 75th.

Women account for around 20% of all civil servants in Afghanistan.

Approximately 25% of the Community Development Council members are female.

There are around 50,000 war widows in Afghanistan, supporting an average of 6 children each.

Key Issues

Violence Against Women – A recent survey found over half of Afghan women had experienced physical violence, and one in five reported sexual violence. The vast majority of the honor killings and violence against women is unprosecuted. There is no legal distinction in the Afghan penal code between consensual and coercive sex outside of marriage, and adultery is illegal, which discourages rape reporting. Taliban insurgents, as well as socially conservative members of Afghan society, attack girls' schools and women who seek employment.

New Discrimination – In July 2009 the *Shia Personal Status Law* came into force, allowing Shia men to deny their wives food if they refuse their husband's sexual demands. Furthermore, guardianship of children is granted exclusively to males, women must obtain their husband's permission to work, and rapists can avoid legal prosecution by paying "blood money."

Female Engagement in COIN – The U.S. Marine Corps has begun to deploy Female Engagement Teams (FETs). Afghans extend female Marines the respect shown to male soldiers, but they gain access reserved for women. FETs have successfully provided humanitarian assistance directly to women and engaged with this important segment of the Afghan population.

Family Power Dynamics – Afghan women have considerable influence on their husbands, brothers, and adolescent sons, and can exert pressure that affects the success of insurgent recruitment campaigns.

Maternal Health – Between 2002 and 2008 Afghanistan saw a 40% reduction in Maternal Mortality, but it still has the second highest maternal mortality rate in the world just after Sierra Leone; 1 in 8 women will die from pregnancy related causes.

- Over 62% of women gave birth to their children without the support of professionally trained health personnel.

Major Challenges for Women in Afghanistan

- **Illiteracy** – 90% of women in rural areas cannot read; the overall literacy rate for women is just over one in ten
- **Lack of Female Teachers** – Only a quarter of teachers in Afghanistan are women, the majority of which are in urban areas.
- **Female Education Access** – Approximately one third of the 6.2 million students in Afghanistan are girls.
- **Female Health Education** – Only one third of married Afghan women are knowledgeable of at least one modern method of contraception
- **Forced Marriages** – Over half of all marriages take place while the woman is under the legal age of 16, and 80% take place without her formal consent.

Possible Questions

- What is the official U.S. stance on the state of women in Afghanistan?
- What being done to enforce women's rights outlined in the Afghan Constitution?
- Is there a collaborative effort of international NGOs, the UN, and government agencies that just focuses on women?
- Should the role of U.S. Marine Corps Female Engagement Teams be expanded?

Budget News Senator Barbara Boxer (CA) introduced the **Afghan Women Empowerment Act** in January of 2009, proposing grants of \$5 million to MoWA, \$10 million to the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission, and \$30 million to women-led nongovernmental organizations with experience in delivering services to Afghan women and children. The Act has been referred to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Further Reading

[UNAMA](#)
[MoWA](#)
[UNICEF](#)

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