



ACTION ALERT

The Road to Peace, Security, and Equality for the Women of Afghanistan

“I believe that peace is not merely an absence of war, but the nurture of human life...”

–Jane Addams (1860-1935)



Quick Facts:

48.9% of Afghanistan’s population is female.

The average life expectancy for women in Afghanistan is 44 years.

84% of Afghan women are illiterate.

One woman dies every 29 minutes in child birth, the second highest maternal mortality rate in the world.

70 to 80% of women in Afghanistan face forced marriages.

Women in Afghanistan receive 50 to 60% of the male wage.

–Source: *United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) Afghanistan Mission*¹

More than six years after the U.S. led war against the Taliban in Afghanistan; Afghanistan is still continuing to take steps towards democracy. According to the Women’s EDGE Coalition, a collaborative partner of the Washington Office of Public Policy, “In making the case for the war in Afghanistan in October 2001, the [U.S.] Administration pledged to restore the rights and dignity of Afghan women who had suffered nearly 23 years of conflict characterized by the systematic repression of women... America’s military intervention in the country and the promised liberation of women represented a new page in Afghanistan’s history.”²

With the invasion of Afghanistan by the Soviet Union in 1979, Afghan women began to see their rights erode. After 23 years of intense conflict the Taliban, a group of fundamentalist Sunni Muslims, controlled the country from 1996 until 2001. The Taliban had imposed an extreme interpretation of Islam on the entire country under which massive human rights violations were committed against women, girls and ethnic minorities. Under the Taliban regime women were not allowed to work, to go to school, to leave home without a male relative, to laugh or speak loudly in public, and violence against women became legalized. The Taliban also required all women to wear the burqa, an all-enveloping outer garment. With the election of Hamid Karzai, the government has taken steps to restore women’s rights, including the drafting of a Constitution which was ratified in January 2004, the presidential elections held in October 2004, and the elections for Parliament and provincial councils held in September 2005. The new constitution states “the citizens of Afghanistan whether man or woman has equal rights and duties before the law.” In addition, Afghanistan has joined the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Yet according to organizations such as the United Nations, Women Waging Peace Policy Commission, the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission and the Women’s EDGE Coalition progress has been slow and much more work needs to be accomplished. “The gains made by Afghan women are significant given the degree of oppression they emerged from in late 2001. But progress has been uneven and has yet to dramatically improve the overall status and role of Afghan women.”³

Despite developments in Afghan women’s human rights, security remains a serious issue which threatens those rights. Areas outside of Kabul are still unsecured and in many regions are controlled under tribal commanders and Taliban loyalists who continue to terrorize Afghanistan. There are on average 548 violent incidents every month and there have been 100 suicide attacks so far in 2007. “...Sexual violence against Afghan women has surged, and women and girls are increasingly subjected to rapes, beatings, kidnappings and other forms of violence and intimidation. Violence and insecurity remain serious impediments to helping Afghan women and rebuilding the country.”⁴ Domestic violence rates are still high and more women have been turning to suicide as their only option out. The United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) states that “violence against women remains endemic. Scores of women and girls have been murdered this year by members of their own families and countless others have been beaten or otherwise abused.”⁵ Women are also forced into marriages against their will with 57 percent of girls married before the legal marriage age of 16.⁶

The new constitution of Afghanistan reserves 25 percent of the seats in the lower house and 17 percent of the seats of the upper house of Parliament for women. Today 68 out of 249 seats of the lower house and 23 out of 102 seats of the upper house are held by



UNITED METHODIST WOMEN’S ACTION NETWORK

Women’s Division – General Board of Global Ministries

100 Maryland Avenue, NE Suite 530 – Washington, DC 20002

Tel. (202) 488-5660 * Fax (202) 488-5681

women. Women's rights groups in Afghanistan and female Parliamentarians have indicated that women in politics face many struggles. "Many female parliamentarians say the powerful lawmaking institution has been systematically dominated by men who oppose gender equity...many in Parliament believe that women do not have the capacity to engage in high politics."⁷ Also, there is only one women minister in the president's cabinet which is the Minister of Women's Affairs. The number of women who registered to vote in 2005 was 44 percent. Unfortunately women in many areas of Afghanistan, especially in rural areas, face obstacles to voting. According to a poll conducted by UNIFEM in 2004, 87 percent of Afghans believed that women need a male relative's permission to vote; 35% of women believed they would not have the permission to vote; and 18 percent of men stated they would not allow their wives to vote."⁸

The U.S. has provided more than \$87 million for health care programs in Afghanistan, which include training women as healthcare workers and community midwives; maternal/neonatal tetanus immunizations; improving hospital care including the construction of women's wings in hospitals and dormitories for women medical students; and the strengthening of maternal and child health, family planning, and nutrition services, particularly in rural areas.⁹ While these are significant developments, health care is still not accessible to a majority of Afghan women. Women still endure the second highest maternal mortality rates in the world, 1,600 to 1,900 deaths per 100,000 live births. In certain areas only 5 to 7 percent of women have access to health care facilities and some areas still do not have any female doctors.¹⁰ In the region of Badakhshan in northeastern Afghanistan, "all women must seek the permission of their husband before seeing a doctor while some men will not allow their wives to see a doctor under any circumstances."¹¹ In other regions women cannot access health care centers because of long distances and lack of adequate roads.

Years of conflict left 80 percent of Afghanistan's schools damaged or destroyed. With the aid of the U.S. and UNICEF the Afghan government has worked to rebuild over 2,000 schools and train teachers throughout the country. The government of Afghanistan and UNICEF have made commitments to increasing girls' enrollment in schools. Close to five million children are enrolled in school, 40 percent of which are girls—the highest in Afghanistan's history.¹² However, as of this year only 19 percent of schools are designated as girls' schools and in 29 percent of the educational districts there is no designated girls' school of any kind.¹³ According to UNICEF, two million children of primary school age (54 percent) are out of school with an estimated 1.3 million of these being girls. Attacks on schools have been on the rise and gains made in education in the last five years run the risk of being lost. More than 100 school incidents, including school burnings, missile attacks, explosions and threats against staff and families, have been reported since January 2006. Children eager to be educated and included are being schooled in tents, under trees or canvases, dilapidated buildings, or exposed openly to the harsh climatic conditions of Afghanistan."¹⁴

Afghanistan is a nation in transition. Without a stable, secure, and peaceful Afghanistan, it will be difficult for women to face and overcome the challenges that restrict their power and equality with men. The Women's Alliance for Peace and Human Rights in Afghanistan notes that "there are still many women who are unsure of their place in this Afghanistan." Only through peace will Afghan women, and all women, experience respect, justice, and the goodness of humanity.



In FY2006 the U.S. gave \$50 million for programs directly addressing the needs of Afghan women and girls. \$7.5 million of that funding was made available to women-led non-governmental organizations.¹⁵ Write or call the President and urge him to continue funding programs for Afghan women and girls when considering the federal budget for FY2009. Call the White House comment line at (202) 456-1111.

Learn more about the United Nations Development Fund for Women's (UNIFEM) internet-based global advocacy initiative "say NO to violence against women." The initiative will run until March 8, 2008 (International Women's Day). For more information visit UNIFEM's advocacy campaign website at www.saynotoviolence.org

Plan an event at your church around International Women's Day in March. Contact the Women's Division office at the Church Center for the United Nations (CCUN) for assistance. Call (212) 682-3633.

Read the *Book of Resolutions 2004* #186 Violence Against Women and Children (pg. 468), #191 The Status of Women (pg. 490), and #286 Global Racism and Xenophobia: Impact on Women, Children, and Youth (pg. 713)

December 2007

¹ United Nations Development Fund for Women Afghanistan Mission. <http://afghanistan.unifem.org/>

² Greenblatt-Harrison, Nora O'Connell and Shanta Bryant Gyan. *Strengthening Afghan Women's Civil Society to Secure Afghanistan's Future: An Analysis of New U.S. Assistance Programs*. Women's EDGE Coalition. www.womensedge.org

³ Sultan, Masuda, Corey Levine and Elizabeth Powley. *From Rhetoric to Reality: Afghan Women on the Agenda for Peace*. Women Waging Peace Policy Commission. February 2005.

⁴ Greenblatt-Harrison, Nora O'Connell and Shanta Bryant Gyan. *Strengthening Afghan Women's Civil Society to Secure Afghanistan's Future: An Analysis of New U.S. Assistance Programs*. Women's EDGE Coalition. www.womensedge.org

⁵ United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). *Violence against Afghan women must stop-UNAMA*. December 4, 2007.

⁶ United Nations Development Fund for Women Afghanistan Mission. <http://afghanistan.unifem.org/>

⁷ IRIN. *The Plight of the Afghan Woman. Afghanistan: Women's hopes for equality fade*. March 8, 2007. http://www.afghan-web.com/woman/equality_fades.html

⁸ United Nations Development Fund for Women Afghanistan Mission. <http://afghanistan.unifem.org/>

⁹ Office of the Senior Coordinator for International Women's Issues, U.S. Department of State. *U.S. Commitment to Women in Afghanistan*. January 3, 2006. <http://www.state.gov/g/wi/rls/58651.htm>

¹⁰ Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC). *Evaluation Report on General Situation of Women in Afghanistan*. http://www.aihrc.org.af/rep_eng_wom_situation_8_march.htm

¹¹ IRIN. *New IRIN Film: Losing Hope-Women in Afghanistan*. June 21, 2007. <http://irinnews.org/PrintReport.aspx?ReportId=72866>

¹² Office of the Senior Coordinator for International Women's Issues, U.S. Department of State. *U.S. Commitment to Women in Afghanistan*. January 3, 2006. <http://www.state.gov/g/wi/rls/58651.htm>

¹³ United Nations Development Fund for Women Afghanistan Mission. <http://afghanistan.unifem.org/>

¹⁴ UNICEF. *UNICEF Humanitarian Action Afghanistan in 2007*. http://www.unicef.org/har07/files/countrychap_afghanistan.pdf

¹⁵ Margesson, Rhoda and Daniel Kronenfeld. *U.S. Assistance to Women in Afghanistan and Iraq: Challenges and Issues for Congress*. Congressional Research Service. The Library of Congress. January 5, 2006.