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Afghanistan: Women human rights defenders continue to struggle for women's rights

On 8th March, International Women's Day Amnesty International expresses support for the human rights of women in Afghanistan in general, and in particular for women human rights defenders in Afghanistan. Their struggles for rights are an essential part of the civil, political, economic, social and cultural development of their country. But in promoting their rights, women frequently encounter discriminatory laws, policies and practices as well as attacks on them as women and as women who are defending human rights. Amnesty International calls on the government of Afghanistan and its international partners to reaffirm their commitment to protect the rights of women and girls in Afghanistan in accordance with international human rights law and standards.

Access to education, in conditions of safety and security, is essential for realising the human rights of girls. In Afghanistan, many girls and women still live under daily threat for attending a school or teaching in one. Their courage in the face of terrible odds is a reminder that the struggle for the right to education is being fought daily in many communities in Afghanistan.

In regions of conflict and insecurity, many women are afraid to leave their homes and send their girls to schools. They have little freedom of movement, limiting their ability to go to work and participate in public life. The fear generated by attacks on schools by the Taleban and other armed groups is undermining the right to education of tens of thousands of children, particularly girls. Over the last year more than 350 schools were reportedly closed in the southern provinces of Afghanistan.

Women continue to be killed in attacks which target civilians by armed groups or indiscriminate attacks by all parties to the conflict. They have also been specifically targeted for attack in many instances by the Taleban and other armed groups and individuals. Aid and health workers, election officials and candidates have all been targeted and some have been killed.

In September 2006, Safiye Amajan, the Director of the Women's Affairs department in Kandahar, was shot dead as she left her home for work. Last year, Zakia Zami, a woman who owned a radio station and was known to be vocal against warlords, was shot dead while sleeping beside her two young sons. Six people have been arrested in connection with her murder, but as in the case of Safiye Amajan, no one has so far been brought to trial.

While Amnesty International welcomes the progress in advancing women's rights since the fall of the Taleban, notably through the establishment of the Ministry for Women's affairs, the National Action Plan for women, improved access to education and representation of women in parliament, Afghan women and girls still face widespread discrimination from all segments of society, domestic violence, abduction and rape by armed individuals, trafficking, forced marriages, including ever younger child marriages, and being traded in settlement of disputes and debts.

Women are also at risk of physical abuse in their own homes. Husbands, brothers and fathers remain the main perpetrators of violence in the home but the power that they exercise is reinforced by both state authorities and informal justice systems through discrimination and lack of will to take effective action against abuses. A report by the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) states that they have recorded more cases of violence against women in the home in the past year as the security situation worsens. Their situation is further compounded by widespread, often dire, poverty limited access to healthcare, job and food insecurity, which further weakens their state.

Prevailing cultural attitudes and societal codes, invoked in the name of tradition and religion, are used as a justification for denying women the ability to enjoy their fundamental rights. Perceived transgressions of such codes have led to the imprisonment and even killing of some women. Such is the desperation to escape abusive situations such as forced marriage that 165 women committed suicide by self-immolation in 2007, according to AIHRC.

Both the Interim Afghanistan National Development Strategy and the January 2006 Afghanistan Compact have sought to strengthen the justice system, protect human rights and promote gender equality.¹ Despite this groundwork, however, Amnesty International is concerned at the inability of the Afghan government to ensure access to justice for women whose rights have been abused. The police, the courts and other justice sector officials seldom address women's complaints of violence, including rape and other sexual violence. Women victims and defendants have little recourse to justice and are discriminated against in both the formal and informal justice systems.

Amnesty International urges the Afghan government to take effective and immediate action to ensure that women's human rights are not relegated to the bottom of the political and development agenda. It must seek to build on its efforts to ensure that laws and policy are translated into action on the ground, so as to guarantee that the human rights of all Afghan women and girls are respected, protected and fulfilled.

The Afghan Government must also ensure that human rights defenders are able to play their vital role in documenting violations of human rights, in upholding international human rights standards and contributing to the development of society. If the rights of defenders are violated, then governments must ensure that those responsible are brought to justice.

Women human rights defenders often face a whole series of violations designed to silence them and paralyse their work. On International Women's Day, women defenders will once again speak out for human rights.

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¹ The Afghanistan National Development strategy outlines strategic priorities and mechanisms for achieving the government's development vision. An interim version (1-ANDS) was presented to the international community in January 2006. The Afghanistan Compact is a political agreement between the Afghan government and the international community to work together towards five-year benchmarks of progress across the three pillars of ANDs: 1) security, 2) governance, rule of law and human rights and 3) economic and social development.