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Afghanistan: Women still under attack -- systematic failure to protect

"At the moment, there are more pressing issues....a civil servant has too much on his mind to deal with women's rights. It is a matter of priorities," Amnesty International interview with the Governor of Kandahar, 13 September 2004

Violence against women and girls in Afghanistan is pervasive, said Amnesty International today launching its latest report *"Afghanistan: Women under attack"*.

"Throughout the country, few women are exempt from violence or safe from the threat of it," states the report.

Daily, Afghan women are at risk of abduction and rape by armed individuals, forced marriage and being traded in settlement of disputes and debts. They face discrimination from all segments of society as well as by state officials. Violence against women is widely accepted by the community and inadequately addressed at the highest levels of the government and the judiciary. Investigations by the authorities into complaints of violent attacks, rape, murders or suicide of women are neither routine nor systematic, and few result in prosecutions.

"Societal codes, invoked in the name of tradition and religion, are used as 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. Some authorities treat women who run away to escape these situations as criminals and imprison them." said Amnesty International.

Afghanistan is in the process of reconstruction after many years of conflict, but hundreds of women and girls continue to suffer abuse at the hands of their husbands, fathers, brothers, armed individuals, parallel justice systems, and institutions of the state itself such as the police and the justice system. There are reported increases in forced marriages and some women have killed themselves to escape, including by self immolation.

"Husbands, brothers and fathers remain the main perpetrators of violence in the home but the social control and the power that they exercise is reinforced by both state authorities and informal justice systems" Amnesty International emphasized.

"We stress that the Afghan authorities have a duty to refrain from committing violations of human rights and to protect women from violence committed not only agents of the state but also by private

individuals and groups. Reform of the criminal justice system is integral to the protection of all Afghan women and it is the responsibility of the state to provide legal safeguards.

Under international human rights standards, Afghanistan must exercise due diligence to secure women's rights, including the rights to equality, life, liberty and security, as well as freedom from discrimination, torture and cruel,inhuman and degrading treatment.

Amnesty International's report highlights the failure of the Afghan authorities to respect, protect and fulfil the rights of women and girls. It stresses that state must accept responsibility and ensure that the right to live free from violence is fully realized for women and men in Afghanistan.

The organization calls on the Afghan government -- as an essential minimum towards ending the patterns of discrimination and violence in the country -- to, among others steps:

- publically and unequivocally condemn all violence against women and girls including that occurring in the family and through decisions by informal systems and perpetrated by agents of the state;
- continue to strengthen the reform of the criminal justice system including comprehensive training of the judiciary and police in order to raise standards which promote and protect the rights if women;
- not invoke any custom, tradition or religious consideration to avoid their obligations to eliminate violence against women;
- modify or abolish existing laws (such as the Penal Code), regulations, customs and practices which constitute discrimination against women in family matters or which permit such discrimination to exist.

The organization simultaneously calls on the international donor community to encourage and support the Afghan government in ending crimes against women through sustained commitment to rebuilding Afghanistan in ways that enable women and girls to realize their rights.

For the full text of the report, please go to:
<http://web.amnesty.org/library/index/engasa110072005>

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