

# .....WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN: Pawns in men's power struggles

*The disastrous consequences of two decades of civil war have weighed heavily on the women of Afghanistan. While the "battles of death are played out by men, women have responsibility for the battles of life". Through years of fighting, destruction and displacement, Afghan women have struggled to support and sustain their families. Injury, death and the loss of family breadwinners have forced women into assuming a greater role in providing for their dependents; a role which has become increasingly more difficult as war has impoverished the country and adversely affected socio-economic development in all areas, even those far removed from frontline fighting.*

*Women have rarely played an active part in the fighting, but they have been targeted nonetheless. Alongside the general hardship and suffering experienced as a result of the war, women in Afghanistan have been subjected to a range of human rights abuses perpetrated against them by the many different parties to the Afghan conflict. Indiscriminate bombing and shelling of residential areas and the extensive use of landmines has cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of men, women and children. Women along with men have been the victims of deliberate and arbitrary killings and "disappearances". In addition to this, women have been subjected to gender specific human rights abuses, such as rape and sexual assault, forced marriage and prostitution.*

The social costs of two decades of civil war in Afghanistan have been enormous. More than one million civilians are believed to have been killed and countless others injured. During the time of the Soviet occupation, over six million people fled the country. Although many returned after the Soviet withdrawal, there are still over two million Afghan refugees in Iran and Pakistan, making Afghans the largest single refugee group in the world. Inside the country, the infrastructure and institutions of state have been largely destroyed by the conflict. According to the UN, the socio-economic conditions of the population are amongst the worst in the world. Healthcare is rudimentary and many are without access to basic healthcare provision. Thousands of children die from malnutrition and respiratory infections every year. Maternal mortality is one of the highest in the world. Literacy rates are extremely low and are estimated to have dropped to as low as four per cent for women. Afghanistan is ranked bottom of the UN gender development index.

The violence directed against women during the Afghan conflict can be located on a continuum of human rights abuses that Afghan women have been, and continue to be, subjected to as a result of their status in society. Traditionally, the lives of Afghan women have been controlled by their male relatives. Notions of honour and shame underpinning cultural norms and practices emphasise female modesty and purity. During the last two decades, but particularly between 1992 and 1995, armed guards have used these norms as weapons of war, engaging in rape and sexual assault against women as an ultimate means of dishonouring entire communities and reducing people's capacity to resist military advances.

Alongside the violence perpetrated against women by members of armed Mujahideen groups, all Afghan political groups have used the status of women as a political tool to claim legitimacy or popularity vis a vis other factions. The cultural constraints existing for women, which are bound up with interpretations of tradition and religion, have repeatedly been raised to the political level by Afghan armed groups. Invoking religion and Afghan culture, most armed groups have made pronouncements about appropriate behaviour for women, imposing restrictions on their freedom of movement and access to employment and education in areas they controlled. Women have been publicly harassed, intimidated and beaten for carrying out activities deemed by armed guards to be 'un-Islamic'. Most consistent and stringent in their enforcement of restrictions on women is the Taliban, an armed political group who currently control all major towns and cities in Afghanistan including the capital, Kabul. Women living in urban areas have been most immediately affected, as more liberal attitudes in town and cities had previously increased opportunities for women in education and work. In contrast, in rural areas where women's lives are already constrained by custom, the impact of administrative restrictions has been felt less. For educated, professional women, however, the loss of freedoms gained over previous decades has been hard to bear.

## **OVERVIEW OF THE HUMAN SITUATION FOR WOMEN DURING THE PAST 20 YEARS**

### **Historical Background**

A number of attempts have been made by different Afghan governments throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century to improve the status of women as part of efforts to modernise the country. Significant reforms favouring women were introduced in the 1920s, 1960s<sup>ii</sup> and then following the establishment of a communist government in 1978. The government of the People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan moved to prohibit traditional practices which were deemed feudal in nature, including banning bride price and forced marriage. The minimum age for marriage was also raised. Education was stressed for both men and women and widespread literacy programmes were set up. Such reforms however were not universally well-received, being viewed by many Afghans – particularly in rural areas – as the imposition of secular western values considered to be alien to Afghan culture and un-Islamic. As had happened earlier in the century, resentment with the government's programme and the manner in which it was imposed, along with widespread repression, provoked a backlash from tribal and Islamic leaders.

### **The years 1979 to 1992**

During the ten years of fighting that followed the Soviet invasion, serious human rights abuses were reported, forcing millions of Afghans to flee the country. Civilians in rural areas where most of the fighting took place were targeted by Soviet and Afghan troops apparently in reprisal for the actions of armed opposition groups. Men, women and children were killed in these attacks and people's homes and livelihoods destroyed. In towns and cities, students and teachers, some of them women, were arrested for opposition to the government, including for participating in largely peaceful demonstrations. Amnesty International reported in 1986 that thousands of political prisoners were

*detained on account of the non-violent exercise of their fundamental human rights, such as freedom of expression and freedom of association. Many were tortured, including women prisoners who testified to being forced to witness the torture of male prisoners.*

### **The years 1992 - 1995**

*Following the collapse of the pro-Soviet government and the failure of the Mujahideen groups to agree to power-sharing arrangements, the nature of the civil war in Afghanistan changed. With the fragmentation of political power and territory under the control of different militias, lawlessness spread all over the country. Alliances and hostilities between the warring factions were often based on personal loyalties, some of which were purely tactical and short-lived. As territory changed hands after long battles, local populations were subjected to violent retaliatory punishments by the victorious forces.*

*Women were often treated as the spoils of war. Many women were raped by armed guards during the period 1992 - 1995. Rape of women by armed guards appeared to be condoned by leaders as a method of intimidating vanquished populations and of rewarding soldiers. In March 1994 a 15-year-old girl was repeatedly raped in her house in Kabul's Chel Sotton district after armed guards entered the house and killed her father for allowing her to go to school. "They shot my father right in front of me. He was a shop-keeper. It was nine o'clock at night. They came to our house and told him they had orders to kill him because he allowed me to go to school. The Mujahideen had already stopped me from going to school, but that was not enough. They then came and killed my father. I*

Civil war broke out in Afghanistan in 1979 after Soviet troops invaded the country to back the communist government in power. Islamic and tribal groups opposed to the policies of the communist government and the Soviet occupation responded by mounting armed opposition. For ten years the country became a Cold War battleground, as Soviet and Afghan government troops fought against armed Islamic guerrilla fighters backed by the USA and its European allies, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran.

After the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, fighting continued between government and opposition forces until the communist government finally collapsed in 1992. The fall of the government did not bring peace, however, as the loosely allied and fractious Mujahideen groups started fighting each other for control of territory and administrative institutions. Despite the formation of a coalition interim government, central political authority was weak and unstable, and Afghanistan plunged into lawlessness.

At the end of 1994, a new political and military force - the Taliban - emerged on the scene. Stating as their aim to rid Afghanistan of corrupt Mujahideen groups, the Taliban have succeeded in capturing large areas of country from opposing armed groups. They are now said to control around 80 per cent of Afghanistan. Fighting however continues between the Taliban and opposition forces and the political situation remains volatile.

*cannot describe what they did to me after killing my father..."*

Several Afghan women reportedly committed suicide to avoid such a fate. In one case, a father who saw Mujahideen guards coming for his daughter reportedly killed her before she could be taken away. Scores of Afghan women were abducted and detained by Mujahideen groups and commanders and then used for sexual purposes or sold into prostitution. Some were victimised for belonging to a particular religious or ethnic group or by commanders or guards allied to an opposed faction. A woman told Amnesty International that her 13-year-old niece was abducted by the armed guards of a warring commander in late 1993. *"They said their commander wanted her. They took her away. She was resisting and screaming, but they dragged her away. We were frightened that if we did anything we all would be killed. They would kill any girl who refused to go with them."*

At the same time, in certain parts of the country, women were also prevented from exercising some of their fundamental rights - including the rights to association, freedom of expression and employment - by Mujahideen groups who considered such activities to be un-Islamic for women. Mujahideen guards were reported to have stopped women from working outside their homes, or from attending health and family planning courses organised by non-governmental agencies. Educated women particularly working in the fields of education and welfare were repeatedly threatened by Mujahideen groups. However, given the unorganised structure of Mujahideen groups and the unstable alliance that made up the interim government after the collapse of the communist government in 1992, the application and enforcement of restrictions on women was unsystematic and inconsistent. In Kabul, for instance, despite the intermittent pronouncements by the interim political authorities restricting women's rights, women continued to play a significant part in public life, working in government departments and the health and education sectors. This participation was precarious, however, depending as it did on the whims of the political authorities at the time.

### **1995 onwards**

With the emergence of the Taliban and their military success against opposing factions, the nature of the conflict and human rights situation in Afghanistan

has shifted once again. In contrast to the Mujahideen groups of the past, the Taliban appeared as a more cohesive force in 1994 and 1995, bringing a degree of order to areas of the country brought securely under their control and winning support from traditional Afghan families.<sup>iii</sup> Their policy of disarming opposition groups resulted in a reduction in acts of banditry and extortion. However, despite the improvements brought by the Taliban in some aspects of personal security, serious human rights abuses have continued to be reported in Taliban-controlled areas.

In the context of the ongoing fighting there have been reports of the Taliban militia carrying out indiscriminate killings and deliberate and arbitrary killings on a mass scale. In parts of the country where their authority has been subject to challenge there have also been reports of arbitrary and unacknowledged detention of civilians. In addition, the enforcement of their interpretation of Islamic law has resulted in the loss of fundamental rights and freedoms previously enjoyed by sections of Afghanistan's civilian population.

The rigid social code imposed by the Taliban includes severe restrictions on women's freedom of movement, expression, and association. A multitude of edicts announced by the Taliban have barred women from employment outside the home except in the health sector, discontinued education for girls, and imposed a strict code of clothing for women in public, ordering them to be veiled from head to foot. The restrictions have most immediately affected educated, working women living in the towns. However, the impact of the restrictions is felt much wider, affecting the poor, uneducated women too, as well as boys and

girls, other family members, and ultimately the long-term development prospects for Afghanistan.

The most deleterious consequences of the Taleban's edicts can be seen in the areas of health and education. Although female health professionals were given special dispensation to continue working under strict guidelines, the Taleban's

policies relating to the segregation of female patients and workers has resulted in women's access to healthcare - which was already inadequate - being further reduced. A number of home visit mid-wife and widow's health schemes have been

shut down, as Afghan female staff have been barred from working outside approved health structures. Attempts by the Taleban authorities in September 1997 to centralise women's hospital services in Kabul would have further limited women's healthcare provision until protests by international aid agencies prompted a reversal in the policy. Not only was the proposed hospital to which women were meant to go for treatment not equipped and not functioning, but its central location would have made it difficult for women to reach given the restrictions on their mobility.

Great concern has been expressed about the edict preventing girls from going to school, which is considered by many as weakening Afghanistan's prospects for economic and social development. Moreover, it is not only girls education which has been affected: due to the fact that around 40 per cent of teachers were female, the ban on female employment has also affected the education of boys. The Taleban has responded at various times saying schooling for girls would be

reinstated when peace and security is achieved, or when they have taken control of the whole country, or when they have sufficient funds to implement segregated education. However, whether the Taleban will live up to these promises remains to be seen. In the southwest of country where the Taleban have been in uncontested control for several years, the restrictions on women's education are still in force. Some initiatives have been taken to get around the Taleban ban by setting up home-based schools for girls. These have been supported by the UN and international non-governmental organisations and operate in some Taleban-controlled areas. However, in Kabul, home-based schools along with vocational training programmes for women were closed by the Taleban administration in June 1998. The head of the Department for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice (DPVPV) accused the schools of spreading anti-Taleban propaganda.

Many people judged to have defied the Taleban's codes on appropriate behaviour or dress have had to endure the pain and humiliation of summary beatings in public by members of the DPVPV. Women have been lashed on the back of the legs by young Taleban guards for not being properly clothed – for showing their ankle or wearing the wrong colour shoes. A group of Afghan women working for an international aid agency in Kabul were beaten and insulted in front of a crowd in May 1997, even though they had special permission from the authorities to continue working with the aid agency. It is an irony that although the Taleban purport their policies on women are in place to ensure the physical protection and dignity of women, many women now cite fear of being beaten by the Taleban as their main security concern.

### **The Taleban, Islam and human rights**

In response to domestic and international criticism about its discriminatory gender practices, the Taleban have repeatedly claimed that their policies are in accordance with Islamic law and Afghan culture, and thus not open to question. The Taleban leader, Mullah Mohammad Omar, has been reported as saying: "We do not accept something which somebody imposes on us under the name of human rights which is contradictory to the holy Quranic law." "Anybody who talks to us should be within Islam's framework. The holy Qur'an cannot adjust itself to other people's requirements. People should adjust themselves to the requirements of the holy Qur'an."

This argument is untenable, however. As many commentators point out, Islam is not a uniform

and homogenous code. Islamic law is not a given, but depends crucially on human interpretations which are shaped by cultural and ethnic differences, historical contexts, as well as political policy. It is therefore a matter of some choice which interpretation individuals or authorities apply. There are many different legal systems and governments in the Islamic world. There are also many Muslim individuals, organisations and countries who have disputed the Taleban's interpretation of Islam saying that it paints a negative picture of the religion.

Moreover, whilst the Taleban for the most part maintain that the international system of human rights and Islamic values are incommensurable, they have on occasion adopted a universalist position when it has suited their political purposes. One such example is when the Taleban accused neighbouring Iran of forcibly returning thousands of Afghan refugees, stating that such an act was violative of international conventions on refugees.

### **AID, HUMAN RIGHTS AND INTERNATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY**

Many UN agencies and non-governmental organisations operating in Afghanistan face fundamental challenges in carrying out their work. After twenty years of war, the humanitarian needs of the population are immense, but the unstable political environment and ongoing conflict make delivery of assistance very difficult and sometimes dangerous. In addition to this, the Taleban's ban on female employment has further constrained the work of aid agencies. In a society in which the seclusion of women is the norm, aid agencies have traditionally relied on Afghan female staff to consult and communicate with Afghan women, carry out needs assessment, distribution, monitoring and other activities vital to reaching individuals in need. Without local female staff, the ability of aid agencies to meet the needs of vulnerable women and provide assistance on a non-discriminatory basis is impeded.

War has been the background and context for widespread and serious human rights abuses in Afghanistan for the past 20 years. The conflict, which has so devastated the country, has been fuelled by outside powers who have provided political and military support to their favoured Afghan armed groups, advancing their own geo-political and economic goals at the expense of the lives of millions of Afghan civilians. For over a decade during the Soviet occupation vast quantities of arms and ammunition poured into the country at a cost of untold millions of dollars. The states primarily responsible were the former Soviet Union (including its successor states of the Commonwealth of Independent States), the USA and its western European allies, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran. All seemed indifferent to the fact that the arms they financed were being used to commit human rights abuses on a massive scale. Even today, years after the Soviet withdrawal, outside political and military interference is recognised as being a critical factor in the perpetuation of the conflict, and in the persistence of human rights abuses. As stated by the UN Secretary General in November 1998: "Afghanistan, once a flashpoint of superpower rivalry, has now become the stage for a new, regional version of the "Great Game", in which the domestic, economic and national security interests of Afghanistan's neighbours and their supporters are played out. A vicious cycle has developed in which the inability of the Afghan factions to agree to a political settlement is both the cause and the effect of persistent outside interference in the affairs of Afghanistan."

The implications of the Taleban's

*discriminatory gender policies have brought the connections between relief assistance, development and human rights sharply into focus. Most international aid agencies working in Afghanistan operate on a basis that relief assistance will be provided in a non-discriminatory manner, promoting the participation of both men and women. The Taliban's edicts have therefore challenged some of the international aid agencies' core operating principles. In response most aid organisations have tried through negotiations with the Taliban to obtain agreements to ensure that assistance is delivered in accordance with the principles of neutrality, impartiality and universality. In a few instances aid agencies have taken the decision to suspend their programmes where agreement has not been reached, although many are understandably reluctant to resort to this step, particularly with regard to life-sustaining humanitarian assistance work.*

*Efforts have been made by the UN to coordinate the work of international organisations in Afghanistan to ensure more integrated approach to peace-building initiatives and assistance programmes, in addition to defining a principle-based approach on the issue of gender discrimination. The UN Strategic Framework for Afghanistan recognises the complementarity between the UN's political and assistance strategies in Afghanistan, and stresses the point that the international response to the situation in Afghanistan can afford no " ... 'disconnects' between the political, human rights, humanitarian and development aspects.."<sup>iv</sup>. Work to develop and implement the strategy, however, has been slowed down due to the reduced UN presence in Afghanistan after international staff were withdrawn from the country following the murder of a UN military adviser in Kabul in August 1998.*

*The work of the UN and international non-governmental organisations in Afghanistan has also been affected by a reduction in the amount of money made available by the international community for projects in Afghanistan. The UN Special Envoy for Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, described the response to the UN's 1999 annual appeal for funds as disappointing. The appeal launched in December 1998 for 113 million dollars needed to meet Afghan commitments in 1999 had raised just 14 million dollars by the end of March. The shortfall in funds from the international community has in part been put down to donor*

*fatigue after 20 years of continuous assistance, but concern over human rights (along with narcotics and criminal activity) have also been a factor.*

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

*The status of women in Afghanistan has been, and continues to be used by armed groups as a political tool in their struggles to secure and maintain power.*

*Most armed groups have imposed restrictions on women in the name of religion and culture as a means of consolidating their own position and legitimacy. At the same time, acts of violence perpetrated against women – public beatings, rape and sexual assault – appear to have been used as instruments of intimidation, humiliation and coercion, of women and the wider population. The repression of women symbolises not only their vulnerability, but also the powerlessness of their male relatives to protect them.*

*Today, the treatment of women in Afghanistan is receiving much international attention. The Taleban's discriminatory gender policies have been heavily criticised by outside governments, intergovernmental organisations, and non-governmental organisations. Whilst the Taleban's response has been to vigorously defend their position, the opposition alliance fighting the Taleban in the northeast have sought to portray themselves as defenders of women's rights, although whether this is anything more than an opportunistic attempt to garner international support remains to be seen. They themselves have committed human rights abuses.*

*This pattern of using the status of women to accrue political advantage must be broken.*

*If the aims of peace and development are ever to be realised in Afghanistan, then women's fundamental human rights must be respected.*

*It is now recognised the world over that progress, social justice, the eradication of poverty, sustained economic growth, and social development all critically depend on the full participation of women on the basis of equality in all spheres of society. As agreed by the governments participating in the Fourth UN World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, local, national, regional and global peace is attainable and is inextricably linked to the advancement of women. In the Platform for Action, world governments pledged to take all necessary measure to prevent and eliminate violence and discrimination against women which are major obstacles to the advancement and empowerment of women.*

*Responsibility for breaking the pattern of human rights abuses against women in Afghanistan lies with Afghan armed groups and Afghan women and men themselves. But the international community has an important role to play in support of this process.*

#### **Recommendations to Afghan Armed Groups:**

- Afghan armed groups are urged to adhere to international norms and standards relating to the protection of human rights, including women's rights.*
- Armed groups should take steps to ensure that their members, and members of armed groups allied to them, are prevented from perpetrating acts of violence against women, such as beatings, rape and sexual assault during armed conflict, as well as forced marriage and abduction.*
- Restrictions placed on women which violate their fundamental rights to freedom of movement, employment and association should be withdrawn. Amnesty International believes that women detained or otherwise physically restricted solely by reason of their gender are prisoners of conscience.*

#### **Recommendations to the International Community:**

- The international community and particularly those governments with influence over the warring factions in Afghanistan should bring pressure to bear on the armed groups to respect women's fundamental human rights*

*in all circumstances.*

- *Outside governments that have provided arms, or continue to provide*

The main countries with influence are brought together by the UN in the “Six plus two” group, which meets regularly under UN auspices to discuss ways of bringing peace to Afghanistan. This consists of the six countries bordering Afghanistan - Pakistan, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, China - plus the USA and Russia.

Other countries with influence that have attended UN meetings on Afghanistan: Egypt, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Netherlands, Saudi Arabia, Sweden, Turkey, UK and the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC).

Afghanistan Support Group brings together main donors and organizations working in Afghanistan. These countries overlap with the UN groupings: Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Sweden, Britain, the US, Australia, Russia, Canada, Norway, Japan, and the EU’s executive commission.

*arms, and political support to the warring factions in Afghanistan have a particular responsibility to ensure that violations of women’s human rights, as well as other civilians, are brought to an end. Governments must end transfers of equipment and training to military forces in Afghanistan which could be used to commit or facilitate human rights abuses.*

- *Donors are encouraged to support the efforts of international aid agencies and UN agencies on the ground who are providing humanitarian and development assistance which facilitates the participation and empowerment of women, and helps to secure their fundamental human rights.*
- *Companies seeking to operate in Afghanistan should use their influence to make sure that human rights are respected, both in their own operations and by the Afghan parties with whom they are in contact.*

**Please send appeals based on the recommendations above to:**

- YOUR OWN GOVERNMENT**
- THE EMBASSIES OF PAKISTAN, SAUDI ARABIA, IRAN, AND THE USA IN YOUR OWN COUNTRY**
- THE TALEBAN :**

**Alhaj Mullah Mohammad Rabbani****Salutation: Dear Mullah Rabbani****(Chairman of the Taleban Caretaker Council)  
Embassy of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan  
House No 8, Street No. 90  
G-6/3 Islamabad  
Pakistan****and**

**Mullah Mohammad Omar  
(leader of the Taleban)**

**Salutation: Dear Mullah Omar**

**Embassy of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan  
House No 8, Street No. 90  
G-6/3 Islamabad  
Pakistan**

**THE UNITED FRONT (ANTI-TALEBAN ALLIANCE):**

**Embassy of the Islamic State of Afghanistan  
31 Prince's Gate  
London  
SW7 1QQ  
United Kingdom**

## **ENDNOTES**

i. Carol A. Le Duc/Homa Sabri, *Room to Manoeuver: Study on Women's Programming in Afghanistan*, UNDP Kabul-Islamabad, July-September 1996, p.9.

ii. In the 1960s, the government of Prime Minister Daoud Khan made wearing the veil discretionary and announced the voluntary end of seclusion. Women were also given equal rights and obligations before the law, which in effect entitled them to vote.

iii. Compared to the Mujahideen groups of the past, the Taleban appear to be more unified, however the movement is still very loose in structure. There are many variations and individual attitudes amongst local Taleban commanders on Taleban policies and their implementation. Although the Taleban nominally control around 80 per cent of Afghanistan, the nature of that control varies from area to area. In certain parts of the country it means not much more than the pushing out or disarming of rival factions. In the cities, however, the degree of control exercised over the civil population by the Taleban, in terms of interference in daily life, is much greater.

iv. *UN Strategic Framework for Afghanistan: Towards a Principled Approach to Peace and Reconstruction*, United Nations Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA), September 1998.