

**Report on the status of Afghan women by KHORSHIED SAMAD  
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Four years after the U.S.-led coalition and Afghan resistance overthrew the Taliban, Afghanistan is still stumbling on the path to peace and stability. But glimmers of hope do exist. The brightest developments include the inauguration of the new Afghan parliament in December, and the political involvement of Afghan women in rebuilding their country.

Afghanistan's new constitution guarantees women equal rights and a quarter of the parliamentary and provincial council seats. Many women have become more socially and politically involved in their daily lives. Millions of women and girls have returned to work and school. Now that the burka is no longer a rights issue, some women have abandoned the head-to-toe public veiling that was mandatory under the oppressive regime.

Under the Taliban, women couldn't travel without a male relative and were whipped in the street for showing as much as an ankle. They were forbidden to work, go to school, or receive any form of education. They lived in overshadowing fear, though many secretly continued to study and go to underground schools.

Afghan women have started to become actively involved in the political arena of their country, demanding increased representation in government and legislatures. Out of the 5,800 registered candidates who participated in the historic parliamentary elections last fall, 565 were women. Women are guaranteed 68 of the 249 parliamentary seats and 26 of the 102 seats reserved for the senate, or upper house. In January, an Afghan woman was voted one of the deputy speakers for the parliament. Clearly, in some sectors of society progress is being made.

But, while a dynamic private sector is giving rise to a new middle class, poverty is still pervasive in Afghanistan. About 53 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line on less than a dollar a day. Life expectancy is around 45 years and one out of five children dies before the age of five, with about 1,600 of every 100,000 mothers dying in

childbirth or because of related complications. Only 13 per cent of Afghans have access to safe drinking water, 12 per cent to adequate sanitation, and six per cent to electricity. Last year was also one of the bloodiest years since the fall of the Taliban, with at least 1,600 people killed in conflict-related violence due to an increase in insurgent attacks and insecurity in the southeastern parts of the country.

If there is any bit of light against the darkness that surrounds security and the economy, it comes in an important area: education. According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), around 5-million children were studying in schools during 2005, an increase of more than a million from 2004. However, about 1.2-million primary-school-age girls are still not studying, according to the same UN study. This is primarily due to cultural restrictions, fear and ignorance. Hundreds of girls' schools were targeted by the Taliban last year, many of them burnt to the ground during night attacks. The militants have recently targeted teachers, killing a school headmaster earlier this year.

Education remains one of the most crucial areas in need of improvement because Afghanistan's population is 70 per cent illiterate. In the rural areas, illiteracy runs up to 96 per cent for Afghan women. These numbers are of epidemic proportions and need serious attention from the Afghan government and international community. Though many new schools are being built all over the country, the country faces a dire shortage of teachers and administrators. Without an increase in teaching capacity and changes in cultural stigma toward girls attending school, the situation will be slow to improve.

The human rights picture in 2005 was mixed. Despite more girls going to school, and significant participation of women in the landmark parliamentary elections, the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission cautioned that serious violations of human rights continued in the country. Last year, at least 100 women set themselves on fire to escape family problems and forced marriages. Around 80 cases of forced marriages and 199 cases of physical torture and beating had also been registered with the commission.

Many women have found work in the past few years. But about 2.5 million - many of them widowed during the past quarter century of war - are in "desperate need of skills to help them find employment," according

to the Ministry of Women's Affairs. There have been some successes, but women are still very much second- and third-class citizens, especially in some remote areas. Without education and economic opportunities, these women have a very limited future.

While the political status of women and girls has improved in Afghanistan, overall progress has been uneven. The volatile security situation and traditional cultural norms continue to limit women's and girl's roles in public life and deny them the full enjoyment of their rights. The needs for reconstruction and strengthening of human capacity, especially in education and health care, will require the sustained attention and support of the international community for many more years to come.

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