



WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN

There have been significant developments in women's participation in public life in the last five years. Women now represent 27 percent of the National Assembly and hold one-sixth of the seats in the Upper House, ranking Afghanistan as 20th among countries in terms of representation of women in the Legislature.

Women are increasingly visible in all sectors, including commerce, communications, technology, engineering, media, public works, mines, industry, security, defence and many others. Many women and girls have returned to school - 29.57 percent, compared to 59.34 percent enrolment for boys in primary, secondary and tertiary education [*these figures are from 2002*].

Afghan women continue to be among the worst-off in the world, especially in measures of health; poverty; deprivation of rights and protection against violence; in education and literacy; and public participation. Afghan women die at least 20 years younger than other women in the world.

Afghanistan's Maternal Mortality Ratio (MMR) is estimated at 1,600 to 1,900 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births, which is one of the highest in the world. Skilled attendants are present at only 14.3 percent of births and one survey found that between 30 percent and 90 percent of women in rural areas could not access health care during pregnancy.

Afghan women have 6.6 children on average, which is nearly one-third higher than even the least developed countries' average of 5.02 children per woman. One million people are added to the population every year, while the weak economic and social infrastructures are ill-prepared to sustain such an increase.

Afghanistan ranks far below its regional neighbours with respect to literacy. Adult females have a literacy rate of 14.1 percent - three times worse than that of men.

Afghanistan and Afghan women fall at the bottom of global poverty indices - with a Human Development Index (HDI) value of 0.346 and a Gender Development Index (GDI) value of 0.300. This ranks Afghanistan as the fourth and third lowest in terms of standards of living and gender disparity related to standards of living in the world.

There are 50,000 widow / women heads of households in Kabul, and given the limited opportunities for women to find gainful employed and to be able to support a whole

family, 65 percent of these were found to have suicidal tendencies and 16 percent have actually attempted suicide.

Women represent some 30 percent of agricultural workers, are engaged in livestock, micro enterprises, and home industries but have limited access to capital, information, technology and markets.

Progress has been noted in women's participation in public life, but they still constitute a minority and are often marginalised in policy and decision-making.

Women continue to experience violence and threats of violence at home and in public spaces. There is still a general lack of awareness of women's rights and inequality remains a huge issue for the Government of Afghanistan to overcome.

UNIFEM is the United Nations agency that supports women's development. It provides financial and technical assistance to innovative programmes and strategies that promote women's human rights, political participation and economic security worldwide.

In Afghanistan UNIFEM implements four key programmes:

1. Gender and Justice;
2. Community Empowerment and Economic Development;
3. Institutional Capacity Building for Gender Mainstreaming; and
4. Gender and the Media.

Notes to editors / sources:

- UNDP Human Development Report 2004;
 - The Promise of Equality: Gender Equity, Reproductive Health and the MDGs. The State of World Population Report, UNFPA: 2005;
 - World Population Prospects: The 2004 Revision – Highlights;
 - Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the UN Secretariat: 2005;
 - Best Estimates of Social Indicators for Children in Afghanistan 1990 -2005. Islamic Republic of Afghanistan / UNICEF: 2005.
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