



Gender Advocacy in Afghanistan

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Millennium Development Goals and Gender

- In September 2000, at the United Nations Millennium Summit, 147 heads of State and Government and representatives from 189 nations in total agreed to a set of time-bound and measurable goals and targets. These Millennium Development Goals, as they came to be known, aim to combat poverty hunger, disease, including HIV/AIDS, illiteracy, environmental degradation and discrimination against women.
- The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are eight goals to be achieved by 2015 that respond to the world's main development challenges. The MDGs are drawn from the actions and targets contained in the **Millennium Declaration** that was adopted by 189 nations and signed by 147 heads of state and government during the UN Millennium Summit in September 2000.
- **The Millennium Development Goals**
 1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
 2. Achieve universal primary education
 3. Promote gender equality and empower women
 4. Reduce child mortality
 5. Improve maternal health
 6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
 7. Ensure environmental sustainability
 8. Develop a global partnership for development
- The 8 MDGs break down into **18 quantifiable targets** that are measured by **48 indicators**.

MDGs and Women

- Of the eight Millennium Development Goals, **Goal 3** challenges discrimination against women, and seeks to ensure that girls as well as boys have the chance to go to school. Indicators linked to this goal aim to measure progress towards ensuring that more women become literate, have more voice and representation in public policy and decision making, and have improved job prospects. But the issue of gender equality is not limited to a single goal — it applies to all of them. Without progress towards gender equality and the empowerment of women, none of the MDGs will be fully achieved.
- To this end, the UN Millennium Project, which is making recommendations to help countries achieve the MDGs, has adopted a framework for MDG 3 that has three dimensions: improving women's capabilities (as measured by education, health, and nutrition); increasing women's access to economic and political opportunities; and ensuring women's security (by reducing women's vulnerability to violence and conflict). Within this framework, the Project's Task Force on Education and Gender Equality has outlined a series of priority actions for countries:
 1. **Strengthening post-primary schooling for girls:** Global commitments to girls' schooling have mainly focused on primary education. While continued focus on universal primary education is crucial, secondary schooling and higher levels of education can increase women's income-earning potential, heighten their ability to bargain for resources within the household, and build their capabilities in other ways.
 2. **Improving reproductive health:** Poor reproductive health causes widespread hardship to families and communities, particularly in the developing world. Actions to address these problems include the provision of quality family planning services, emergency obstetric care, post-abortion care, and prevention and treatment services for HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.
 3. **Investing in infrastructure to reduce women's and girls' time burdens:** Routine household responsibilities often limit the ability of women and girls to take part in educational, productive, and civic activities. Investments in public infrastructure—including accessible and affordable transportation,

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68 women parliamentarians take oath in the lower house of the parliament.

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- improved water and sanitation systems, and efficient energy sources can reduce this burden.
4. **Guaranteeing property and inheritance rights for women and girls:** To address this imbalance, several types of changes within countries are recommended, including amendments to statutory and customary laws, the promotion of legal literacy, and support for groups that can help women to make land claims.
 5. **Eliminating gender inequality in employment:** Recommendations include closing the gender gap in earnings. Since women's responsibilities as the primary caretakers within the family constrain their job opportunities, countries are also encouraged to expand national policies and programs to support the care of children, the elderly, and other family members.
 6. **Increasing women's seats in government:** The Beijing Platform for Action recommends that governments set a target of 30 percent of seats for women in national parliaments. Women remain largely absent from decision-making bodies around the world. Recommendations include setting gender quotas for these bodies.
 7. **Combating violence against girls and women:** A combination of actions, such as the provision of education, health, and legal services, can reduce such violence. The task force also recommends a global campaign to mobilize resources and support for national plans to end the violence.

Afghanistan and MDGs

“In our work to reach those objectives, as the Millennium Declaration made clear, gender equality in not only a goal in its own right; it is critical to our ability to reach all the others. Study after study shown that there is no effective development strategy in which women do not play a central role.”

United Nations Secretary-General
Kofi A. Annan

- **Goal 1:** Available data suggests that about 20 percent of rural Afghans are chronically unsure of obtaining enough food, and another 18 percent are vulnerable. Nearly 40 percent of the children under three are underweight, and more than half the children in that age group are stunted.
- **Goal 2:** Afghanistan has one of the highest proportion of school-age (7-12) children in the world: about 1 in 5 Afghans is in a school-age child. Half of the school-age children are still out of school. Women and girls lag far behind men and boys in education.
- **Goal 3:** Afghanistan has one of the lowest female literacy rate in the world, between 9 percent and 18 percent. Violence against women is a pervasive and silent epidemic due to the low status of women.
- **Goal 4:** Over a fifth of all Afghan children die before the age of five. Of these, a third dies soon after birth, and more than half within the first year. High mortality rates are due to lack food, poor sanitation, and low literacy especially of women.
- **Goal 5:** Afghanistan has the highest rate of maternal mortality of any county except Sierra Leone and Angola. Overall maternal mortality is estimated at 1,600 to 2,200 deaths per 100,000 live births. As a result of the low level of female education and gender segregation, fewer than 15 percent of births are attended by medically trained personnel and only 10 percent by a traditional midwife.
- **Goal 6:** Afghanistan is also one of the 22 countries with the highest rates of tuberculosis, with young women constituting about 70 percent of cases. Afghanistan is at high risk of HIV/AIDS because there is no blood screening, little condom use, and a very little knowledge of the disease or how to prevent it, reinforced by widespread illiteracy and cultural inhibitions about discussion of the disease and how it spreads.
- **Goal 7:** Only 6 percent of population has access to a regular supply of electricity. Only 13 percent of the population has access to safe drinking water, with poor sanitary conditions threatening overall health.
- **Goal 9:** (Enhancing Security) Lack of security is principal obstacle to the education and public participation of women, as well as to long-term investment for development. Afghans define the lack of security as their greatest problem.

Goal 3: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women.

Target: Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and all levels of education no later than 2015.

Indicators:

1. Ratio of girls to boys in primary, secondary and tertiary education.
2. Ratio of literate females to males of 15-24 year old.
3. Share of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector.
4. Proportion of seats held by women in national parliament

Goal 3 and Women in Afghanistan

- The context of gender relations in Afghanistan must be viewed through the prism of traditional, intensely patriarchal Afghan culture. The primary social unit in Afghanistan is the family, extending to kin group, and tribe. Most Afghan women do not want to be isolated from their family unit, and the integrity of the family must be respected. Afghan culture is based on the code of honour, which is largely manifested in the behaviour of one's 'women'.
- The foundation of gender roles is the division of space into the public/community (men's) space and the private/domestic (women's) space, with corresponding roles and responsibilities for each.
- The causes of gender inequity are complex everywhere, but they are especially so in Afghanistan, due to a combination of factors that include poverty, the effects of war, local customs, and various cultural traditions.
- Emancipation of women has been controversial in Afghanistan's history. Serious impediments to "gender mainstreaming" remain in the areas of national reconstruction and development, arising in part from limited awareness of how to bring about change.
- Gender mainstreaming is not an end in itself but a means to achieving the goal of women's empowerment and gender equality. Gender mainstreaming is both a technical and political process that requires shifts in organizational culture and ways of thinking as well as in organizational structures and their resource allocation decisions.
- Violence against women is a widespread problem in Afghanistan. To combat this problem, putting in place suitable legislation is a necessary first step. But adoption of legislation that criminalizes all forms of gender based violence poses a real challenge in the absence of data and awareness of what constitutes violence against women.
- Despite the recent upsurge in primary school enrolment of boys and girls, in order to bring about parity in their enrolment, for every 3 boys enrolled 5 girls will have to be enrolled. The significant catch-up required means that there will have to be focused and targeted efforts to reduce the disparities in education.
- With a rate of between 9-18%, Afghanistan has one of the lowest female literacy internationally.
- Goal three is critical for achieving all other MDGs in Afghanistan. The ratio between girls to boys in primary education is 0.52:9. According to Afghanistan's national MDG report, "Wide gender disparities are prevalent nationally but are particularly acute in southern provinces... where girls represent less than 15 percent of total [primary] enrollment." Much work needs to be done in order to eliminate the deeply manifested gender bias in Afghanistan.



With a rate of between 9-18%, Afghanistan has one of the lowest female literacy internationally

Afghanistan's Revised Goal 3 Targets and Indicators

- 1. Eliminate gender disparity in all levels of education no later than 2020**
 - Ratio of girls to boys in primary, secondary and tertiary education
 - Ratio of literate females to males (15- to 24-year-olds)
- 2. Reduce gender disparity in economic areas by 2020**
 - Ratio of female to male Government employees
- 3. Increase female participation in elected bodies at all levels of governance to 30% by 2020**
 - Proportion of seats held by women in national, provincial and district representative bodies
- 4. Reduce gender disparity in access to justice by 50% by 2015 and completely (100%) by 2020**
 - Adoption, review and amendment of legislation that protects the rights of women, particularly in employment, family rights, property and inheritance and in accordance with the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan
 - Adoption of legislation that criminalizes all forms of gender and sexual-based violence

Existing Challenges and Constraints

1. Inadequate knowledge, among male and female family and community members, of women's rights in the context of Islam, particularly regarding female education;
2. Early-child and forced marriages;
3. Selling and exchanging of daughters;
4. Violation of customs and culture against women's rights such as Jirgas (councils of male elders);
5. Cultural barriers towards girls education.
6. Lack of trained and qualified female teachers; most girls' schools in villages are taught by male teachers, and in some places by Mullahs;
7. Lack of access to girls' schools in most villages;
8. Cultural barriers that prohibit girls from traveling long distances or mixing with boys.



Women during a workshop on elimination of forced and child marriage protocol.

Afghanistan could achieve goal 3 through women's access to economic opportunities and education, and ensuring that women's rights are protected

Consider ways to better motivate people responsible for security to register and monitor cases of gender-based violence through providing regular trainings.

Afghan Government: Achieving Goal 3

1. **Adopt a long-term vision and commitment:** In order for women and men to enjoy equal rights, gradual cultural changes are required. Gender disparities are deeply rooted in people's lives and have become social norms that communities have lived with for centuries. Attempting to change this way of life is not a matter of launching a short-term project. Development of a long-term vision by the government in collaboration with all actors is needed for the achievement of goal 3. Sustained efforts to create a healthier, safer and more just environment for all is needed.
2. **Continue to improve law and order:** In addition to building infrastructure, the government will need work towards improving law and order. Separate provisions to provide security to more vulnerable groups, including widows, displaced women and young girls should be part of the important policies of government. A mechanism is needed to ensure that women can approach authorities without fear and be assured that their problems will be handled with confidentiality. This will require the government to:
 - Establish special units in police stations that can deal with cases of violence against women.
 - Consider ways to better motivate people responsible for security to register and monitor cases of gender-based violence through providing regular trainings.
 - Overcome impunity and bring perpetrators to justice.
 - Punish perpetrators so that more women are willing to come forward and demand justice.
3. **Provide quality and access to education:** Education is key in striving for gender equality. In addition to providing opportunities for girls to access education, boys and girls should be exposed from early childhood to respect women and human rights. Hence:
 - Women's rights issues in education curriculum, beginning at the primary level, should be included.
 - Increase female Islamic scholars and disseminate "positive" messages to the community about educating girls in the context of Islam and international laws and conventions.
 - Explore ways to increase girls' enrolment. For example, develop policies and programs for transportation; increase number of female teachers; establish new schools, including within IDP and returnees' communities.
4. **Register all marriages:** Make marriage registration compulsory and examine
5. **Encourage positive behavioral changes at communities:** Information on gender-based issues should be disseminated among community leaders and gender equality and positive attitudes to safeguard women's rights should be promoted within communities. Information on the importance of women's rights in their religion should be made available. Women should also be involved in this campaign, side by side with their husbands, to raise awareness of rights and work towards gender equality.
6. **Involve educated Islamic scholars:** As religion is of central importance in people's lives, it can be used to influence them positively. Educated scholars belonging to the same ethnicity should be asked to address gatherings on topics promoting respect for women and their rights. This will promote positive attitudinal changes in communities towards gender equality, which are acceptable within their own religious boundaries.
7. **Sensitize men and boys:** Encourage women participating in trainings/workshop on gender equality and human rights to bring along their husbands or other male relatives who can also be involved in the trainings. Training of women and men on women's and human rights is critical to the process of changing children's attitudes.
8. **Avoid hiring and promoting men and women in government posts who are not demonstrably promoting women's rights.**

Parliamentarians on Gender-Sensitive Legislation

- Promotion of gender-sensitivity in parliament has begun. Parliamentarians, with the support of various organizations are trying to mainstream gender into all functions of parliament, including legislation. Women's rights supporters are advocating women's rights protection in the legislation, budgets, and programs. Women's issues are one of the subjects that prevails during the interaction of the parliamentarians with their constituencies.
- The broad goal of women's rights advocates in lobbying and promoting gender issues with parliamentarians is to improve the lives of women throughout Afghanistan. One of the ways of achieving this goal is to bring the concerns of women to the parliament, which in turn can lead to gender-sensitive legislation and programs.
- It is essential for the advancement of women's rights in Afghanistan that parliamentarians are well informed in gender sensitivity and given the tools and resources to achieve gender mainstreaming.
- Many of them participate in different information sharing and exposure sessions. These sessions are provided by a number of Afghan and international expert agencies to both women and men parliamentarians.
- A number of women parliamentarians have taken the initiative to establish a gender forum aiming at promoting gender equality.
- Through these initiatives, parliamentarians are aiming to insure the implementation of the concept of equality as protected by the constitution.
- Development of policy briefs on a number of women's issues will be important, as it is elsewhere, for the development of informed policies and programs.
- One of the best indicators of progress made thus far is the emergence of women's issues discussed on floor of parliament.
- Another indicator is the recent tendency of politicians and candidates to more often consult their female constituents.
- Respect for women's equality and understanding of women's rights will both take time to develop and mature within the Parliament, but much progress has already been made, and women's rights advocates are confident that future discussions, budgets, and legislations will reflect their efforts to bring gender-sensitivity into the government's programs and budgets.



A woman parliamentarian casts her vote during a parliament session

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References and Resources (of MDGs and Parliamentarians on Gender-Sensitive Legislation)

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ABOUT THIS NEWSLETTER:

The Gender Advocacy in Afghanistan newsletter is produced by UNIFEM Afghanistan and distributed to 1000 journalists, media training centres, associations, institutions, as well as government, NGO, and UN agencies. The newsletter presents factual information, statistics, and references relevant to a number of different gender campaign issues in order to facilitate gender-based campaigns by Afghan journalists, government, and civil society organizations.

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International Women's Day and Afghan Women

- The 8th of March marked International Women's Day, and in Afghanistan, women's rights advocates and government leaders gathered to celebrate the progress made, and pay tribute to Afghan women's ongoing struggle for equality.
- International women's Day is the first and foremost occasion to celebrate and honor women's achievements around the world, and this year the theme adopted by the UN was "Women in Decision-making".
- In Afghanistan, the ceremony was an occasion to underline the problems still afflicting Afghan women, and to draw attention to the new National Action Plan for Women.
- One example of progress over the past few years is the inclusion of more women in government than ever before in the history of Afghanistan. There are currently 68 women parliamentarians in the lower house, or *Wolesi Jirga*, and 32 women in the upper house, or *Meshrano Jirga*.
- The women holding these decision-making roles, along with the women in the Provincial Councils, give the women of Afghanistan a strong, representative voice in government and act as a constant reminder of the much-needed equality between women and men in Afghanistan.
- One of the most celebrated highlights of this year's International Women's Day was the launch of the Interim National Action Plan for the Women of Afghanistan (I-NAPWA). The Ministry of Women's Affairs, after consultation with all ministries of government, presented the Interim National Action Plan for Women, which, according to the Afghanistan Compact, needs to be fully implemented by end 2010.
- The Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) has successfully led the process of developing the Interim National Action Plan for Women and begun the process of integrating gender concerns in all government institutions.
- The Interim National Action Plan for Women of Afghanistan will provide a common framework and serve as the government's blueprint for advancing women's status and promoting the equal rights and responsibilities of women and men.
- The I-NAPWA underlines the need to promote women's leadership and to guarantee Afghan women's full and equal participation in every sphere of public life.
- The promotion of the plan clearly demonstrates how seriously the Afghan government considers its obligations to Afghan women, as outlined in Afghanistan's constitution and ratified international conventions such as CEDAW.
- It should be noted that I-NAPWA is a plan only, and that successful implementation will depend on ongoing political commitment from each of Afghan's government ministries.
- The promotion of the National Action Plan and the integration of the VAW database into various legal departments are positive signs that Afghanistan is moving toward full equality for women and men.
- The participants of the International Women's Day events share the hope that Afghanistan's men and women will lead the way to a peaceful and progressive country, where women and men enjoy security, equal rights, and opportunities in all aspects of life.