

## Helpdesk Research Report: Violence against women and girls in Afghanistan

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**Query:** What is the evidence of the prevalence, trends and drivers of violence against women and girls in Afghanistan? Since 2005, what programmes to tackle violence against women and girls have been implemented by different actors (state, civil society, multilateral institutions)? What have been their successes and unintended consequences to date?

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### 1. Overview

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) in Afghanistan is endemic (Human Rights Watch 2009) and widespread (Hasrat and Pfefferle, 2012). Surveys indicate that up to 87.2% of Afghan women experience violence on a regular basis (Global Rights: Partners for Justice 2008). Though there have been some quantifiable improvements for women and girls since the fall of the Taliban regime in 2001 (for example, women now make up 27% of Afghan MPs) personal safety is one of the most significant challenges remain in relation to securing women's rights (ActionAid, 2011).

The literature on VAWG in Afghanistan is comprehensive and rich with illustrative case studies that convey individuals' experiences of violence (see for example Human Rights Watch, 2009). The next section of this report assesses the prevalence, trends, and drivers of GBV, referencing available statistics where possible. While the literature does not mention specific drivers of violence against women, it identifies factors that may increase a woman's susceptibility to experiencing GBV. These include:

- Marital context – if the female is in a forced, polygamous or child marriage, or if she is married through *baad* or *baadal* (practices in which unmarried girls are given or exchanged to resolve disputes or instead of a dowry)
- Illiteracy of both partners
- Geographic context: living in a rural community or in southern or eastern border provinces
- Attempting to access justice.

In section three, the report identifies programmes relating to VAWG that have been implemented in Afghanistan by state, civil society, and international actors. Though many VAWG-related activities seem to have been conducted, very few impact evaluations have been carried out. It is therefore difficult to assess what successes or unintended consequences such programmes have had. Examples of the types of activities actors engage in include:

- Setting up and running women's shelters for those fleeing abusive partners (Voice for Women Organisation)
- Providing legal assistance and supporting legal aid centres (HAWCA; UNDP)
- Offering psychological counselling and support (Medica Mondiale)
- Advocating both nationally and locally for women's rights (Afghan Women's Network)
- Training legal experts in issues relating to women's rights (Womankind)
- Broadcasting radio programmes aimed at increasing public awareness of women's rights (UNAMA).

Identified risks and lessons learned from programmes include:

- Project sustainability can be problematic; many international NGOs have had difficulty recruiting local staff (NRC; Medica Mondiale)
- Female staff and client security have been threatened (UNDP; NRC)
- It is important to have an effective monitoring and evaluation framework to gauge impact (UNDP)
- Programming should take account of customary and traditional practices that affect women (Kuehnast et al., 2012, p. . 5)
- Programmes should be adaptable and flexible so as to be responsive to the constantly shifting political and security environment (UNDP).

## 2. Prevalence, trends and drivers

### Prevalence of violence against women and girls in Afghanistan

Comprehensive national statistics on gender-based violence in Afghanistan are not available, and research has shown that most crimes against women and girls go **unreported** (UNAMA, 2012, p. 2). However, to counter this knowledge deficit, NGOs and other organisations have conducted a limited number of surveys to assess the scale of GBV.

In one of the most comprehensive studies of gender-based violence, Global Rights: Partners for Justice (2008) surveyed **4,700 households in 16 provinces in Afghanistan in 2006**. The

data collected gave an alarming indication of the pervasive nature of domestic abuse across the country. Overall, **87.2% of respondents** reported experiencing one form of physical, sexual, or psychological violence, with 62% experiencing multiple forms of violence. Psychological abuse was experienced by 73.9% of the surveyed women, while 17.2% had endured sexual violence. The percentage of respondents in forced marriages (as differentiated from arranged marriage) was 58.8%. The survey also identified broad variations between provinces. For example, 100% of surveyed Kochi women living in Kabul had experienced one form of physical, sexual, or physiological violence; 42.6% of surveyed women in Kandahar had experienced sexual violence; and 91.6% of surveyed women in Khost were in forced marriages (p. 1).

The Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission identified **3331 instances** of gender-based violence in the **first six months of 2012** alone (Hasrat and Pfefferle, 2012). The majority of these involved physical violence, followed by verbal and psychological violence, economic violence – such as the denial of alimony or inheritance – and other types of violence (p. 5). The report found that the majority of violent acts are perpetrated by the victim's husband, accounting for 70.1% of reported instances (p. 22). Other male relatives, such as fathers, brothers and fiancés, as well as mothers, mothers-in-law, and sisters, were also identified as assailants (Ibid.).

#### **ActionAid survey, 2011: women's perceptions of rights-related trends**

In 2011, ActionAid conducted a survey of 1000 women across Afghanistan that sought to gauge opinions on changes that have occurred in the last decade (ActionAid 2011). They found that though there have been some improvements for women's rights since 2001, women still encounter notable challenges, particularly relating to their **personal safety**. Nine out of ten the surveyed women indicated they were fearful of the return of a Taliban-style government, with one third specifically worried about international troops leaving (p. 14). The majority of women cited '**security**' as the biggest concern in their lives (p. 6), with those under 30 particularly worried about **sexual assault** (p. 14).

#### **Factors that may increase susceptibility to GBV**

The literature available does not identify explicit drivers of gender-based violence. However, it highlights some common factors that may increase a female's susceptibility to experiencing GBV. These include:

##### **Marital context**

In 2010, the United Nations Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the Office of the High Commission for Human Rights (OHCHR) issued a joint report on traditional practices and the elimination of violence against women (UNAMA/OHCHR 2010). They found that some community and religious leaders have perpetuated harmful practices against women (p. 3), despite these being inconsistent with the tenets of Islam. The report draws particular attention to marital practices. **Child marriage** is viewed as a significant cause and consequence of gender discrimination and a severe form of child abuse (p. 18). Afghan legislation allows girls to marry at age 16 (or 15 with the permission of their father or a court) and males at age 18. However, customary practice means that girls often marry significantly younger. In 2009,

reports commissioned by Human Rights Watch, UN Women and UNICEF found that 57% of all brides in Afghanistan were under the age of 16. While cultural and social factors are at play in child marriage, often there is also an economic or political imperative. In a 2008 survey, Medica Mondiale found that girls are being forced into marriages at an early age to settle financial and political debts (2008, p. 20).

Many cases provided in the literature demonstrate the harm child marriage can cause (see for example UNAMA/OHCHR, p. 18-20). Girls who marry young are often denied education (Oxfam, 2011), forced to marry men significantly older than them (Human Rights Watch, 2012, p. 1), and face health risks. The high Afghan fertility rate of 7.4 children per mother and the extent of maternal mortality – every hour, two women die while giving birth – has been associated with the early marriage of underdeveloped girls (Medica Mondiale, 2008, p. 58). In their comprehensive survey, Global Rights Partners for Justice (2008) found that being in a child or forced marriage was one of the most significant factors placing women at greater risk of domestic violence (p. 31).

Other marital practices are identified in the literature as being harmful to women and girls. Women in **polygamous marriages** have been found to experience higher incidences of all forms of violence than those in monogamous (including forced) marriages (Global Rights: Partners for Justice 2008, p. 30). This was attributed to husbands not treating each wife equally, creating resentment and conflict among the wives and with the husband (Ibid.). UNAMA/OHCHR (2010) and Human Rights Watch (2012) cite the **practices of *Baad* and *Baadal*** as increasing females' susceptibility to violence. These practices involve unmarried girls being given or exchanged to resolve disputes or to stand in the place of a dowry (Human Rights Watch 2012, p. 32). *Baad* typically occurs in the context of a past crime, with the girl given in marriage to appease the wronged party. Human Rights Watch (2012) found that girls who experience marriage through *baad* 'frequently face serious abuse in the receiving family since they are perceived as atoning for the wrong committed by their family member' (p. 32).

### **Location and literacy**

Global Rights: Partners for Justice (2008) found illiteracy and location can compound a woman's experience of gender-based violence (p. 31). In their comprehensive survey, they found that the likelihood of experiencing all other forms of violence (other than sexual violence) was **higher for women living in rural areas** than those living in urban areas (p. 19). A total of 84.9% of surveyed women living in rural communities indicated they had experienced at least one form of physical, psychological or sexual violence, compared to 69.4% living in urban areas (Ibid.). Variations by province are also identified, with the **highest rates of violence occurring in Nuristan, Khost, Faryab, and Kandahar** (p. 21). In addition, the survey found that the proportion of women who experienced violence was at its highest when both husband and wife were illiterate (81.1%) and at its lowest when both parties were literate (69.1%) (p. Ibid.). Levels of forced marriage were also found to be lower when both parties had literacy skills (Ibid.).

### **Attempting to access justice**

The Afghan legal system has been described as having a 'deeply entrenched culture of immunity' when it comes to addressing violence against women (UNAMA/OHCHR, p. 1). In a

2009 study of women's rights in Afghanistan, Human Rights Watch found that women encounter many obstacles in their access to justice, including 'mistrust, fear of harassment or violence from the police, weak legal protections, the threat of retaliation, and inaccessibility of police stations due to distance and transport costs' (Human Rights Watch, 2009, p. 62). UNAMA adds that cultural constraints, social taboos, and customary and religious beliefs can deter women from reporting violence (UNAMA, 2012, p. 24).

Many cases in the literature provide examples of women experiencing further harm when they attempt to access justice (see for example Human Rights Watch 2009). Those that flee an abusive partner can often find themselves accused of 'moral crimes' such as *zina* (adultery or having pre-marital sex) or 'running away', which often involve long imprisonments (Human Rights Watch, 2012, p. 34). Research carried out in 30 of 34 provinces in Afghanistan by the UNAMA found that in almost all cases, rape victims had been charged with *zina*, indicating that this appeared to be 'standard practice' (UN Women, 2011, p. 54), while Human Rights Watch (2012) estimates that there are currently over 400 women and girls imprisoned in the country for 'moral crimes'. Those that do flee abusive situations can often find themselves at significant risk of harm, including death, if they are found by their families (Global Rights: Partners for Justice, 2008, p. 34-35). Research conducted by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission indicates that in six months in 2012 alone, as many as 60 'honour killings' took place (Arian, 2012).

### **3. Programmes to address violence against women and girls**

#### **State programmes**

Since 2005, the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan has introduced a limited number of measures to enhance the status and participation of women in Afghan society. The National Action Plan for Women of Afghanistan (NAPWA) is the State's main vehicle for gender mainstreaming. NAPWA advocates three goals for promoting gender equality: eliminating discrimination against women; developing women's capital; and ensuring women's full participation and leadership in all aspects of Afghan life (Islamic Republic of Afghanistan 2007, p. 12). The Law on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) was enacted in August 2009 and was viewed as a significant step forward in the legal protection of women's rights (UNAMA/OHCHR 2011). For the first time, this law criminalises 22 acts of violence against women including rape, child marriage, forced marriage, and forced self-immolation (p. 1).

UNAMA (2012) conducted an analysis of the implementation of EVAW from September 2011 to October 2012. It found that, while the EVAW marked a significant legislative step towards ending harmful practices against women, the overall use of the law remained low. Women still encountered significant challenges in reporting violent crimes relating to cultural constraints, fear of the police, and social stigma (p. 2). The International Centre for Transitional Justice (2009) has called for the systematic rebuilding of the judicial system in Afghanistan at every level (p. 18). It notes that 'confusion, inefficiency and corruption of the formal justice systems means that the majority of Afghans turn to it as a last resort', favouring customary traditional mechanisms (Ibid). Here women can face pressure to withdraw their allegations, are forced into mediation, or face allegations of 'moral crimes' (UNAMA 2012, p. 2.).

The Afghan government undermined the EVAW with the inaction of the Shi'a Personal Status Law in 2009-2010. Drafted by the Shi'a Council of Religious Scholars and adopted through a non-transparent legislative process, this piece of legislation violates both national and international law regarding the protection of women's rights (UNAMA/OHCHR 2009, p. 28). It formalises discriminatory norms (Amnesty International 2011, p. 4). Aspects which have attracted particular censure from women's rights advocates include:

- The obligation for a woman to obey her husband, including with respect to the frequency of sexual intercourse
- The bride's virginity being a condition for the validity of marriage
- Unequal rights regarding property, guardianship of children, inheritance, and divorce.

In a submission to the UK Government's International Development Select Committee in May 2012, Human Rights Watch notes that the Afghan state has 'done far too little to support women's rights' (Human Rights Watch, 2012 May), and that while EVAW was an important step, the law remains broadly unenforced. It highlights a lack of support services for women and children who flee violence – at present Afghanistan has 14 women's shelters, each able to house only 20 to 25 women and their children (Ibid).

### **Civil society programmes**

A number of Afghan civil society groups have programmes targeting women and girls, but there is very little analysis of the impact of these programmes. Some of the identified organisations and activities they engage in are listed below:

#### **Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) -**

<http://www.aihrc.org.af/en>

The AIHRC has a dedicated Women's Rights Unit which has five priority areas: Leadership; Education; Empowerment; Advocacy; and Monitoring and Evaluation. The unit engages in a range of activities that include:

- Conducting research on issues relating to women's rights, including gender-based violence
- Provide training to government and civil-society organisations on women's issues
- Encouraging female participation in education through public awareness programmes in schools, universities, and teacher training institutes
- Regularly monitoring female prisons, detention centres and shelters
- Identifying, monitoring, and following up cases of violations of women's rights

#### **Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan (RAWA) -**

<http://www.rawa.org/index.php>

Established in 1977, the RAWA is the oldest political and social organisation for women in Afghanistan. It provides support to female victims of war and atrocities, including helping to secure passage to Pakistan for medical treatment and providing counselling. In addition, the organisation runs targeted programmes on health-care and education which include mobile health teams and home-based schools and literacy courses.

**Voice for Women Organisation (VWO) - <http://vwo.org.af/>**

Voice for Women Organisation is an Afghanistan based NGO that strives to improve the position of women in Afghan society through advocacy for women's rights, social protection, and capacity building. VWO supports a series of projects which include:

- The Herat Women's Shelter
- The Family Conflict Resolution Centre
- Legal Advice Bureau
- Badghis Women's Shelter
- The Ghor and Farah Women's Shelters
- The Women's Resource Centre
- The Nimroz Shelter Project

**The Afghan Women's Network (AWN) – <http://www.afghanwomennetwork.af>**

The AWN was established in 1996 following the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing with the aim to empower Afghan women and ensure their equal participation in Afghan society. AWN is one of the leading Afghan organisations striving to improve situation of women, and has engaged in partnerships with international donors and NGOs. The organisations activities are diverse and range from having a role in drafting legislation to protect women, to supporting local violence against women committees that help mediate disputes.

**Humanitarian Assistance for the Women and Children of Afghanistan (HAWCA) -**

<http://www.hawca.org/main/index.php>

HAWCA has a number of projects which seek to target gender-based violence at local and national levels. The 'Strengthening national capacity to combat GBV' programme covers the provinces of Kabul, Bamyan, Nangarhar, and Daykundi. It seeks to strengthen the capacity of government bodies, service providers, and law enforcement bodies in addressing gender-based violence. The organisation also supports two legal aid centres for female victims of violence in Kabul and Herat. These offer legal advice and assistance, professional training, and psychosocial support.

**Afghan Women's Social and Cultural Organisation (AWSCO)**

[http://globalwomensmovement.wikispaces.com/Afghan+Women+Social+and+Cultural+Organization+\(AWSCO\)](http://globalwomensmovement.wikispaces.com/Afghan+Women+Social+and+Cultural+Organization+(AWSCO))

AWSCO was established in 1994 and states its mission as to 'contribute to the rehabilitation and development of Afghanistan through the planning, designing and undertaking of economic and humanitarian assistance programmes, as well as by developing the skills and capacity of Afghan women'. The organisation supports a series of projects throughout central and northern Afghanistan that include women's rights education, health programmes, emergency relief, and vocational training.

**Programmes by multilateral institutions and international donors**

**The United Nations Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA)**

UNAMA supports efforts to protect and promote the rights of Afghan women and girls, and has a particular role in reporting and advocating on gender-based violence (UNAMA 2010 p. 51). The organisation has human rights officers throughout the country who report on human rights abuses against women, and raise appropriate concerns with government authorities (Ibid.). Together with partners and local women's groups, UNAMA also advocates for the rights of women in legislative reform processes, and in promoting women's involvement in

political processes (p. 52). Particular activities the organisation has been involved in include: the broadcasting of radio programmes aimed at informing the public on women's rights and workshops and discussions with law enforcement authorities on EVAW (Ibid.).

**UNDP (2010) UNDP Afghanistan Gender Equality Project (GEP) Annual Progress Report – 2010. Kabul, Afghanistan: UNDP.**

<http://www.undp.org.af/Projects/Report2011/gep/2011-03-08-%20Annual%20Report%20of%20Gender%202010.pdf>

The UNDP Gender Equality Project carried out a number of programmes that attempted to target (directly or indirectly) gender-based violence in Afghanistan. Some of the activities they were involved in included: the training of 500 religious leaders on gender issues; the establishment of two gender sensitive media centres; the establishment of eight Legal Help Centres; and the creation of two income generating activities to help women become more economically empowered (p. 6). UNDP found that the Legal Help Centres, which are located in Herat and Balkh, have had a positive impact on women's representation and access to justice, and have led to a demonstrable increase in the number of women willing to register cases of domestic violence (p. 6). The progress report identifies a series of key lessons and risks (p. 16). The lessons learned include:

- The need to establish strategic alliances and partnerships with other organisations engaged in similar activities
- The importance of maintaining a flexible approach, with room for adaptability during implementation, and providing space for adapting the interventions to emerging demands.
- The importance of developing an effective built-in monitoring and evaluation mechanism

There were two risks identified in the report: first, security threats meant the often frequent changing of venues of training programmes; and second, uncertainty surrounding the project's duration led to the departure of project staff.

**Medica Mondiale (2009) Project Evaluation – Afghanistan. Cologne: Medica Mondiale.**

[http://www.medicamondiale.org/fileadmin/content/04\\_Projekte\\_und\\_Themen/Projekte/Projekt\\_evaluierung/Evaluierung\\_Afghanistan\\_engl..pdf](http://www.medicamondiale.org/fileadmin/content/04_Projekte_und_Themen/Projekte/Projekt_evaluierung/Evaluierung_Afghanistan_engl..pdf)

Medica Mondiale runs a series of projects in Afghanistan that aim to advocate for women's rights. The organisation has provided support to over 7,000 women through psychological counselling, legal assistance, and political human rights work (Medica Mondiale 2012, p. 1). In addition, they offer training courses on trauma-sensitive ways of dealing with women who have suffered sexualised or other forms of violence (Ibid.). In this 2009 impact evaluation, Medica Mondiale assesses three main projects that ran from 2006 to 2008: supporting the establishment of an Afghan women's rights organisation; setting up an interdisciplinary project centre regarding violence against women and girls; and providing sustainable support for traumatised women through the training of female experts (2009, p. 1). Though the evaluation identified that Medica Mondiale had provided a much-needed service, it found that in general the project goals were too ambitious and that the implementation of all planned activities was not possible (p. 3). The lack of available local capacity was identified as a significant constraint on project activity and sustainability (Ibid.).



**Nordic Consulting Group (2011) Review of Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) Afghanistan. Oslo, Norway: NCG.**

[http://www.ncg.no/novus/upload/file/Reports/2011-Review%20of%20Norwegian%20Refugee%20Council%20\(NRC\)%20Afghanistan.pdf](http://www.ncg.no/novus/upload/file/Reports/2011-Review%20of%20Norwegian%20Refugee%20Council%20(NRC)%20Afghanistan.pdf)

The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) has had a presence in Afghanistan since 2002 and provides legal assistance, transitional and permanent housing, and education and life skills training to refugee returnees (p. 5). In 2010, NRC launched the Project Prevention and Response to Gender-based violence project in Faryab. This sought to build and develop networks with other women's organisations, provide legal counselling for female clients, and employ two legal trainers (p. 24). Early into the project's development, staff changed the name of the NRC to the 'Norwegian Embassy Project' due to what they denote 'sensitivities surrounding the term gender-based violence, and gender issues in general' (p. 24). It was originally intended that an Afghan woman would be hired as the project coordinator but it proved difficult to recruit someone for this position (p. 24). Though the evaluators denote it 'too early' to assess the specific impacts the project has had, they note that it has developed good relationships and trust with partners. At this early stage, they caution that sustainability, particularly of legal assistance, may be a problem, and recommend integrating gender-based violence and the protection of women into existing programmes for greater success (p. 24-25).

**Womankind and the Humanitarian Assistance for the Women and Children of Afghanistan (HAWCA)**

<http://www.womankind.org.uk/where-we-work/afghanistan/womankind-projects/hawca-project/>

The joint Womankind-HAWCA project seeks to increase the understanding of violence against women and improve the legal support for survivors. At the individual level, the project provides support, legal aid and counselling to victims of abuse. At the regional and national level it advocates for public officials and traditional leaders to challenge violence against women, implement legislation, and improve the environment in which women can exercise their rights. Though it is only two years into its running, the project has identified a number of successes. These include 38 women having benefited from legal aid services, 16 women and girls benefiting from psycho-social counselling, and the setting up of a coordination committee with other women's rights organisations.

**Kuehnast, K. et al. (2012) *Lessons from Women's Programs in Afghanistan and Iraq*. Special Report 302. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace.**

[http://www.usip.org/files/Gender/SR\\_Lessons\\_from\\_Women's\\_Programs\\_in\\_Afghanistan\\_and\\_Iraq.pdf](http://www.usip.org/files/Gender/SR_Lessons_from_Women's_Programs_in_Afghanistan_and_Iraq.pdf)

In this short report, Kuehnast et al. bring together some of the lessons learned from conflict and post-conflict programmes of support for women in Iraq and Afghanistan. They note that progress than has been made on Afghan women's rights since the fall of the Taliban in 2001 but caution that there is still much to do (p. 3). The lessons learned identified by the authors include:

- The need for outreach to the private sector to develop strategically targeted public-private partnerships to combat female poverty
- The need for training to educate police and judicial officials on issues of human rights, women's rights, and gender-based violence.

- That programming must take account of customary and religious laws that affect women
- That programmes need to be adaptable, woven into the local context, and maintained over an extended period of time (p. 5).

A number of recommendations are also presented (p. 5). These include:

- Develop a holistic approach to programming and training that brings together key areas such as political empowerment, leadership, advocacy, and technical and vocational training.
- Build bridges between women at national and provincial levels to foster cooperation, find common ground, and build associations.
- Bridge the divide between ethnic and sectarian groups
- Engage men in women's programming and employ men who champion human rights
- Make use of media to enhance women's role in peace-building.

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## 6. Additional information

### Other useful resources

GSDRC, 2011, *Helpdesk Research Report: Impact evaluations of programmes to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls*, University of Birmingham

<http://www.gsdrc.org/docs/open/HD789.pdf>

GSDRC, 2012, *Helpdesk Research Report: Evaluation of programmes related to violence against women and girls*, University of Birmingham

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Human Rights Watch - <http://www.hrw.org/>

ActionAid - <http://www.actionaid.org.uk/>

UNAMA - <http://unama.unmissions.org/default.aspx?/>

Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission - <http://www.aihrc.org.af/en>

Medica Mondiale - <http://www.medicamondiale.org>

Voice of Women Organisation - <http://vwo.org.af/>

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**About Helpdesk research reports:** Helpdesk reports are based on 3 days of desk-based research. They are designed to provide a brief overview of the key issues; and a summary of some of the best literature available. Experts are contacted during the course of the research, and those able to provide input within the short time-frame are acknowledged.