

Women in Afghanistan

The people of Afghanistan have suffered extensive human rights violations in the course of the past twenty years. The Soviet invasion and occupation from 1979 to 1989, aided by Afghan communist military and civilian collaborators, brought mass killings, torture, disappearance, the largest recorded refugee outflow in history, and a scourge of landmines.

In November 1994, a group named "Taliban" emerged as a military and political force. Taliban, which means "students of Muslim religious studies," are poorly educated rural Pashtun youths mostly recruited from refugee camps and religious schools (madrasas) in neighboring Pakistan. This movement, led by Mullah Mohammed Omar, a 31-year-old religious leader, claims to be restoring peace and security through the imposition of a strict Islamic order. With no functioning judicial system, many municipal and provincial authorities use the Taliban's interpretation of Shari'a (Islamic law) and traditional tribal codes of justice.

The Taliban is the first faction laying claim to power in Afghanistan, that has targeted women for extreme repression and punished them brutally for infractions. To our knowledge, no other regime in the world has methodically and violently forced half of its population into virtual house arrest, prohibiting them on pain of physical punishment from showing their faces, seeking medical care without a male escort, or attending school.

After taking control of the capital city of Kabul on September 26, 1996, the Taliban issued edicts forbidding women to work outside the home, attend school, or to leave their homes unless accompanied by a husband, father, brother, or son. In public, women must be covered from head to toe in a burqa, a body-length covering with only a mesh opening to see and breathe through. Women are not permitted to wear white (the color of the Taliban flag) socks or white shoes, or shoes that make noise while women are walking. Also, houses and buildings in public view must have their windows painted over if females are present in these places.

Furthermore, in January 1997, Taliban officials announced a policy of segregating men and women into separate hospitals. This regulation was not strictly enforced until September 1997 when the Ministry of Public Health ordered all hospitals in Kabul to suspend medical services to the city's half million women at all but one, poorly-equipped hospital for women.

The Taliban's edicts restricting women's rights have had a disastrous impact on Afghan women and girls' access to education, as well as health care. One of the first edicts issued by the regime when it rose to power was to prohibit girls and women from attending school. Humanitarian groups initiated projects to replace through philanthropy what prior governments had afforded as a right to both sexes. Hundreds of girls' schools were established in private homes and thousands of women and girls were taught to sew and weave.

On June 16, 1998, the Taliban ordered the closing of more than 100 privately funded schools where thousands of young women and girls were receiving training in skills that would have helped them support their families. The Taliban issued new rules for nongovernmental organizations providing the schooling: education must be limited to girls up to the age of eight, and restricted to the Qur'an.

Taliban policies that restrict women's rights and deny basic needs are often brutally and arbitrarily enforced by the "religious police" (Department for the Propagation of Virtue and the Suppression of Vice) usually in the form of summary, public beatings. In addition, Afghan staff members of international organizations have reportedly faced threats, harassment, beating and arrest in the course of conducting their professional duties.

PHR's researcher when visiting Kabul in 1998, saw a city of beggars -- women who had once been teachers and nurses now moving in the streets like ghosts under their enveloping burqas , selling every possession and begging so as to feed their children.

The Taliban's abuses are by no means limited to women. Thousands of men have been taken prisoner, arbitrarily detained, tortured, and many killed and disappeared. Men are beaten and jailed for wearing beards of insufficient length (that of a clenched fist beneath the chin), are subjected to cruel and degrading conditions in jail, and suffer such punishments as amputation and stoning.

Children in Afghanistan

According to UNICEF's State of the World's Children Report, Afghanistan has the fourth worst record in under five child mortality, the infant mortality rate being 152 per 1,000 live births.

According to a survey conducted by the UNHCR in 1997, there are an estimated 35,000 street children in Kabul alone. More than 250,000 children are reported dying every year of malnutrition alone in Afghanistan.

Every three hours or so, a child is blown up as a result of more than ten million landmines planted all over Afghanistan.

In a group of refugee children, after being asked to raise their hands if any of them have had their parents killed by the Taliban, seven out of 10 raised their hand to show they had lost a parent. A recent United Nations Children's Fund report says that 72 percent of Afghan children have lost a relative in the last four years of fighting.