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Maternal death rates in Afghanistan may be worse than previously thought

Unpublished research from the UN Population Fund suggests the country's maternal mortality figures may be higher than reported

By Sune Engel Rasmussen

The Guardian (30.01.2017) - <http://bit.ly/2kQrN4X> - For years, declining death rates among pregnant women have been hailed as one of the great gains of foreign aid in Afghanistan.

In reality, however, Afghan women dying in pregnancy or childbirth may be more than twice as high as numbers provided by donors would suggest.

Since 2010, published figures have shown maternal mortality rates at 327 for every 100,000 live births, a significant drop from 1,600 in 2002. Yet recent surveys give a different picture.

In one unpublished study, the Afghan government found an average level of maternal deaths between 800 and 1,200 for every 100,000 live births, according to aid workers in Kabul who have seen the research.

If accurate, this would mean that women in Afghanistan – despite more than 15 years of international aid aimed at improving maternal mortality figures – may be dying from maternal complications at rates similar to those found in Somalia and Chad, and only surpassed by South Sudan.

In another review, the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) found as many as 1,800 maternal deaths a year in the remote Afghan province of Ghor. Nine out of 11 provinces had higher death rates than the number normally used by donors.

Both the UNFPA mortality numbers and the government's own survey have yet to be released. A spokesman for the ministry of public health said the survey was not ready to be publicised yet, and declined to discuss findings.

The country's emphasis on training midwives in recent years is slowly building numbers. Yet, despite this improved capacity, driving up numbers of health personnel is only half the solution, according to Bannet Ndyabang, UNFPA's Afghanistan representative: "Training is not the only thing. They have to be deployed in the areas where they are

needed. It doesn't matter that you have health centres if they're not staffed with skilled personnel. [Midwives and nurses] have to be given incentives to work in rural areas."

One reason for the discrepancy in the figures is a lack of reliable data. Collecting such information in Afghanistan is notoriously difficult. Worsening security prevents even officials from the ministry of public health, let alone foreigners, from travelling to rural areas.

In a recent audit of \$1.5bn (£1.2bn) donated by the US to Afghan healthcare, the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction – the US congressional watchdog – criticised the use of unreliable data to prop up claims of progress in Afghanistan.

According to Sigar, "missions are required to be transparent and communicate 'any limitations in data quality so that achievements can be honestly assessed'. In all cases Sigar reviewed, USAid did not disclose data limitations."

Sigar said similarly selective data use lay behind USAid claims that life expectancy in Afghanistan has risen by 22 years. More recent surveys by the World Health Organization show relatively modest increases of six and eight years for men and women respectively.

A USAid spokesperson said: "In Afghanistan, a country suffering from decades of conflict, reliable health and population data is scarce and difficult to obtain. USAid strives to use the best available data for programming decisions and invests to improve data quality for measuring progress. This commitment includes our continued support for independent nationwide surveys on the state of the health sector. These surveys, and the methodology they use, are publicly available."

More reliable data is available, however.

While numbers used by international donors were based on samples from three of the 360 districts in existence at the time, the UNFPA survey was much more extensive, covering 70% of households in 11 of the country's 34 provinces.

The UNFPA did not survey southern and eastern provinces, where rates are almost certainly high because conflict and poor infrastructure make healthcare inaccessible to millions of women.

In addition, a 2013 study by the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation at the University of Washington reported 885 annual maternal deaths in Afghanistan. According to the researchers, that was an increase of 24% on a decade earlier.

In Afghanistan, reality often conflicts with official statistics. The UK government, for instance, claims that 85% of Afghans are now covered by basic health services.

Yet, in a 2014 Médecins Sans Frontières report, four out of five Afghans said they did not use their closest public clinic because they believed the quality of services and availability of staff was so poor. According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 9 million Afghans are without access to basic health services.

Healthcare has also been a key priority for the British government in Afghanistan, though it's not clear exactly how much money goes specifically to reducing mortality among pregnant women.

Since 2002, the UK has provided more than \$1.7bn (£1.4bn) to the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund, which allocates a significant portion to healthcare. Healthcare for mothers is a key priority, the UK embassy in Kabul said.

In a country where reliable data is so elusive, a stronger focus on monitoring progress, and further investment in it, is desperately needed, or the benefits of the large amount of aid going into healthcare will remain unclear.

Other reading:

[**Afghanistan: The Shame of Having Daughters**](#)

Afghanistan's mysterious vanishing plan on women and peace talks

Donors should press Kabul to live up to commitments

By Heather Barr

HRW.org (27.10.2016) - <http://bit.ly/2e2hxHO> - When you agree to give someone billions of dollars, you want to be pretty sure you know what you're getting in return, right?

But donors who doled out US\$15.2 billion in aid to Afghanistan seemed to have failed to do just that when it came to the critical issue of the participation of women in the peace process.

At the October 5, 2016, Brussels Conference on Afghanistan, donors agreed to provide \$15.2 billion in aid over the next four years. That's great news, because the needs in Afghanistan are increasingly desperate, as security deteriorates, the economy falters, and hundreds of thousands of people sent back from Pakistan, Iran, Europe, and elsewhere struggle to survive alongside more than a million internally displaced people.

But things start to look shaky when you look at the 24 benchmarks the Afghan government agreed to – after extensive negotiations with donors ahead of the summit – in return for the assistance.

One of these benchmarks relates to Afghanistan's implementation of Security Council Resolution 1325, adopted in 2000, calling for women's "equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security." This is especially important in Afghanistan, where women's rights activists have for years raised concerns that the government will trade away women's rights in an effort to reach an accommodation with the Taliban. These fears have been exacerbated by the routine exclusion of women from peace negotiations, which has continued, despite promises to the contrary, under the National Unity Government that took power in 2014.

The Brussels benchmark states that the Afghan government will "demonstrate progress in implementing [the National Action Plan on Resolution] 1325 as specified in its implementation plan through annual published reporting in 2017 and 2018."

But the catch is that the donors who negotiated this benchmark haven't seen this implementation plan. The government in June 2015 issued a National Action Plan on implementing Resolution 1325, but it was a general set of goals, not a specific plan. The government promised, at a previous donor conference, to produce a detailed implementation plan by the end of 2015. That plan was never produced, or if it was, it was never made public or, apparently, shared with donors.

Afghan women had no chance to negotiate for themselves how the Brussels benchmarks would represent their interests. That was reserved for the donors putting up the cash. Those donors should face hard questions about why, on this crucial issue, they were ready to settle for a plan they'd never seen. And the Afghan government should demonstrate they have a plan by letting the world see it.

UN official: For Afghan women 'glass is half full'

By Lynne O'Donnell

AP (26.08.2016) - <http://apne.ws/2byaHHc> - As the United States prepared to invade Taliban-ruled Afghanistan 15 years ago, then-First Lady Laura Bush took over her husband's weekly radio address to tell the American people that part of the reason for going to war after the attacks of September 11, 2001, was to liberate Afghan women from the brutality that had been forced on them by the extremists' regime.

As the war against the Taliban grinds on, Afghan women are still largely treated as property and barely a week goes by without news emerging of a woman or girl being stoned to death, burned with gasoline, beaten or tortured by her in-laws, traded to repay a debt, jailed for running away from a violent husband, or sold into marriage as a child.

Abuse of women in Afghanistan remains entrenched and endemic, despite constitutional guarantees of equality, protection from violence and age-old practices such as trading young women to pay debts.

Earlier this month, news emerged from remote central Ghor province of Zarah, a pregnant 14-year-old who was allegedly tortured and set on fire by her in-laws as they took revenge on her father over a failed deal to marry one of their relatives.

Mohammad Azam, 45, traveled to the capital, Kabul, to call for justice for the killing of his daughter. Yet he too had taken a young bride as payment for construction work.

The British government said in a report in early July that "documented cases of violence against women have risen" in the first half of 2016, with 5,132 cases reported to the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission, "including 241 murders."

Attending a small rally in western Kabul to support Azam's call for justice, women's rights activist Veeda Saghari said violence against women is largely ignored by Afghanistan's judicial sector.

"That is why all kinds of violence against women such as acid throwing, beating, stoning, informal community tribunal verdicts, burning, forced divorces, forced marriages, forced pregnancies, forced abortions have reached a peak," she said.

In fairness, much has improved for Afghan women since the Taliban were ejected from power. During five years of Taliban rule, women were not permitted to attend school or work, were largely confined to their homes, and subject to public beatings for violations of strict rules on what they could wear in public. When it came to their health, very few had access to doctors, and benchmarks such as maternal mortality were among the worst in the world.

Now millions of girls go to school, compared to practically none in 2001, and access to health care is widespread. The constitution protects women from the worst excesses they

suffered before 2001. Figures published by the World Bank show a drop in maternal mortality, for instance, from 1,340 per 100,000 live births in 1990 to 396 in 2015.

Many women work for the government and security services, run their own business, and are elected to parliament. Figures from President Ashraf Ghani's office show 33 percent of all teachers are women, and there are 240 women judges. He has nominated four women as Cabinet ministers, appointed seven as deputy ministers and four as ambassadors.

Yet for most Afghan women, the struggles of today are little different to those under the Taliban. Many working women are targeted and often killed by extremists. High-profile lawmaker Shukria Barakzai, who ran a secret school for girls during the Taliban era, survived a suicide bomb attack in 2014, and was appointed ambassador to Norway last year.

But in impoverished and rural areas, girls can often be of less value to their families than their animals. A burns unit in the western city of Herat has a ward dedicated to treating young women who set themselves on fire, as much a cry for help as a suicide attempt. Women's prisons in major cities, including Kabul, hold hundreds of women accused of adultery for having sex outside marriage, as well as young women who have run away from home to escape arranged marriages or abusive, often much older, husbands.

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, the executive director of U.N. Women, has found that government officials, judges, clerics and educators are often receptive to the concepts of women's rights, as enshrined in the Afghan constitution. But, she said, "When we are dealing with extremism there is pushback, every step of the way there is pushback."

Following the fall of the Taliban, the Western push for women's rights led some Afghans to feel that Western values were being forced on them, she said, and that had led to problems of acceptance of women's rights as homegrown.

The situation is complicated by almost 40 years of conflict.

"We have a generation that has only known war, and at the same time you also have a generation that has been educated, that knows about the lives that are lived by people in other parts of the world. There has to be some confusion as people try to deal with all these issues," Mlambo-Ngcuka said, adding: "So the glass is half full."

That doesn't mean Afghanistan should be given special treatment, she said. "Rape is rape, physical violence is physical violence. So in our quest not to be overbearing and not to overshadow local efforts, I don't think that we should also move away and not talk about the universality of rights," she said.

As a member of the United Nations and signatory to the "same charters as all the other member states, we have to hold them to the same standards because the nation has actually signed on to the same value system as the other nations," she said.

"What is good for a child in Europe in terms of protection, in terms of making sure that they have a right to education, not to be married early, that is good for a child in Europe and it is good for a child in Afghanistan."