

# 'There hasn't been rehabilitation': Afghanistan struggles with fate of 'Daesh wives'

*The Afghan government is facing hard decisions over the futures of hundreds of detained radicalised women and their children.*

By Elise Blanchard

The Guardian (26.06.2020) – <https://bit.ly/38cp8w6> – The “Daesh wives” from the Afghan branch of Islamic State look very young. Most are already mothers.

Hundreds of them have fled combat, airstrikes and near-starvation in eastern Afghanistan where the faction of Isis known as Islamic State in Khorasan (ISK) has been under fierce bombardment from Afghan and US special forces, as well as involved in violent clashes with rival militants the Taliban.

Last November, after a military operation, President Ashraf Ghani declared Isis “obliterated” in the region where it first gained a foothold in 2014, and more than 225 militants, 190 women and 208 children surrendered.

In Jalalabad city, separated from the male fighters who were

taken to other detention centres or prisons, the women were first housed by local authorities in a makeshift accommodation centre, awaiting transfer to Kabul or back to the remote Afghan and Pakistani tribal areas where most originated.

In the centre, children were everywhere— – running, laughing, playing with colourful toys. On the walls they'd drawn drones, explosions, men shooting AK-47s from pickup trucks— – memories of their time spent in hell near the Pakistani border in Nangarhar province, ISK's former stronghold.

Weakened and pushed farther north, the group, with an estimated 2,200 armed fighters, retains sleeper cells in cities such as Kabul, and continues to claim responsibility for murderous attacks on civilians.

Most of the girls and women the Guardian spoke to in Jalalabad and in the detention centre of the Afghan intelligence services in Kabul refuse to criticise ISK.

"Only God knows if Daesh is good or bad," says Asma, 15, from the tribal areas, and mother of a little girl. Why did she join the fighters? "My father gave me to my husband," she says. "I was scared."

Lyla Schwartz, a psychologist supporting some of the girls in the Kabul juvenile detention centre, says this was probably true. "In this context and culture, I don't think it's very likely that all of these girls had a say if they joined or not.

“The children and women experience sexual abuse,” she adds. “Do they support the group? No. Ideologies? Yes. Do they believe in an Islamic state where people practise certain things and believe certain situations and things they have been taught? Yes. And is that pretty strict and conservative? I would say yes. But they don’t agree in the fighting, and the war and the trauma that they see.”

But Schwartz, founder of the NGO Peace of Mind Afghanistan, is concerned at the lack of care for the women and girls. “There hasn’t been rehabilitation, like education, psychological processing of trauma.”

Asma followed her husband when he crossed the border with Isis but she had to surrender, she says, to escape “the bombs that fall from the sky”.

Most of the dozens of family members we interviewed spoke of airstrikes that had killed many women and children. It was in this region in 2017 that President Donald Trump tested the largest conventional bomb ever dropped by in combat by the US, his “mother of all bombs”. –

“A bomb blast killed my baby and I picked up his body piece by piece,” says Hamida, who said she was “19 or 20”.

“Americans did it,” she adds. Like Asma, Hamida is an ethnic Pashtun from the tribal areas. She joined at 15, with a

husband who was also underage at the time. "Isis taught him how to use weapons and that fighting with others was good work," she says.

In another room, Mariam, 16, was resting, heavily pregnant with her second child. Her Afghan village, Takhto, was the theatre for shocking atrocities. One video showed ISK members killing local elders by making them kneel on explosives.

Mariam says she misses her husband, a Pakistani fighter twice her age. She was given to him as a wife by her brother-in-law after ISK took over her village.

"We stayed back home and served our husbands," recounts her cousin, another 15-year-old Afghan mother. "Now we want to go back to our home."

Other women came from farther afield, from central and south Asia or from Europe, sometimes more educated, sometimes joining a son or brother.

Deeba, 52, sold her house in Lahore and came to Afghanistan with her family to join her son, already living with Isis there. "He told us only here is pure Islam, that coming is like the Islamic [hajj]," she says, seated in the detention centre.

In the mountains, Deeba kept running the family: she remarried her daughter-in-law to another of her sons when the first was

killed in an airstrike. She arranged the marriage of her widowed daughter, Rewa — who had lost her husband in combat just a month after their wedding — to a nephew who himself had lost his first wife in a rocket explosion.

Despite so much sorrow in her 22 years, Rewa is cheerful. “Life was simple there, we chose to live just like our prophet used to live ... we were happy,” she says.

“The men in Daesh were better than the men here ... they would turn their eyes not to look at us.” And attacks on civilians? “I swear it’s a big lie ... they have never done anything like that,” she responds.

Atfah, 24, from Punjab, arrived from Pakistan to live with Isis about three years ago, with her sisters and mother, an ex-English teacher. One brother died fighting in Syria. A second one told them to join him in Afghanistan.

“My brother called us to come for jihad,” she says. “He said that the Americans drop airstrikes and put bombs on Muslims, and kill our children and women ... That’s why we do jihad.”

Handling hundreds of women and children is an unprecedented challenge for the government.

For Javid Faisal, spokesman of the Afghan National Security Council, the women are a threat. “Wives and children of Daesh fighters were all radicalised to an extreme level,” he warned.

“We can’t release them the way they are right now.”

But the reality is more nuanced. According to a security source working on the issue, although some women did have an active role and are awaiting trial for membership of a terrorist group, others “are here because they were accompanying their husbands, and didn’t participate as fighters or support”.

For these women, authorities are trying to establish identities, to send them back to their families or embassies. It is a long process, dogged by political wrangling.

While many women fear being sent home, Ela, 30, wants to leave at any cost. Originally from Turkey, she was troubled by what she found in the rough, remote mountains of Nangarhar. “Afghanistan is like a different planet,” she says.

She is one of the few with harsh words about the fighters: “They think women don’t understand anything.”

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**AFGHANISTAN: Women with disabilities face systemic**

# abuse

*Barriers, discrimination in health care, education.*

HRW (27.04.2020) – <https://bit.ly/2Yzlda3> – Afghan women and girls with disabilities face high barriers, discrimination, and sexual harassment in accessing government assistance, health care, and schools, Human Rights Watch said today.

The 31-page report, “[‘Disability Is Not Weakness’: Discrimination and Barriers Facing Women and Girls with Disabilities in Afghanistan](#),” details the everyday barriers that Afghan women and girls with disabilities face in one of the world’s poorest countries. Decades of conflict have decimated government institutions, and development efforts have failed to reach many communities most in need. The Afghan government should urgently reform policies and practices that prevent women and girls with disabilities from enjoying their basic rights to health, education, and work. Afghanistan’s donors should support and advocate for the rights of all Afghans with disabilities.

“All Afghans with disabilities face stigma and discrimination in getting government services, but women and girls are the ‘invisible’ victims of this abuse,” said Patricia Gossman, associate Asia director at Human Rights Watch and author of the report. “The Covid-19 crisis will make it even harder for women and girls with disabilities to get adequate health care.”

Afghanistan has one of the world’s largest populations per

capita of people with disabilities. More than four decades of war have left millions of Afghans with amputated limbs, visual or hearing disabilities, and depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress. The under-resourced Afghan health services are failing to meet the needs of this population, and women and girls with disabilities are far less likely to obtain any assistance.

Human Rights Watch interviewed 26 women and girls with disabilities and their families in the cities of Kabul, Herat, and Mazar-e Sharif, and 14 health and education professionals in these cities.

The Covid-19 pandemic exacerbates the problems faced by many people with disabilities. For Afghan women with disabilities who live in rural areas far from medical clinics, the absence of transportation, lack of paved roads, and long distances to clinics can create insurmountable barriers to obtaining health care. The Afghan government should undertake a comprehensive review of health services for people with disabilities, particularly in rural areas, to improve outreach and access.

A young woman whose family moved to the city because of her disability said: “I know people who are in remote districts, but since they have no one [to bring them], they cannot benefit from [healthcare] services.”

Government officials have sexually harassed women with disabilities, including when they visit ministries to claim disability benefits. The stigma associated with reporting abuse of this kind means that few women, especially those with



disabilities, report those responsible. A woman in Kabul said: "I went to the ministry to get this certificate [for assistance]. They asked me whether I am married and when I said no, they told me that they can find me a husband. When I refused, the ministry employee told me that I can get this certificate only if I agree to be his girlfriend."

Entrenched discrimination means that people with disabilities face significant obstacles to education, employment, and health care, rights guaranteed under the Afghan constitution and international human rights law. For example, many people with disabilities in Afghanistan have not been able to acquire the national identity card (taskera) needed to obtain many government services.

An estimated 80 percent of girls with disabilities are not enrolled in school. Resistance from schools to accommodate children with disabilities, lack of dedicated transportation, and families' reluctance to send children with disabilities to school are major factors preventing children with disabilities from attending school. The Afghan government should develop sustainable solutions to increase access to quality, inclusive education for children with disabilities, particularly girls.

Girls with disabilities are far more likely to be kept home from school because of compounded socio-economic barriers and violence. An official with a humanitarian group said that children with disabilities "cannot go to regular schools due to lack of ramps. In some cases, the school principals do not want to enroll them, because they need to be taken care of."

Afghan women and girls with disabilities are frequently socially isolated, humiliated in public or within their own families, considered a source of shame for the family, or denied access to public spaces and community or family social events. "I'm supposed to get married, but my future in-laws think I cannot now," said a woman injured during fighting in 2017. "I have no hope for the future, but if I get treatment, I would have hope."

"In preparing for possible peace talks, Afghanistan's leaders have generally ignored the large population of Afghans who have disabilities, many as a direct result of the conflict," Gossman said. "The government needs to ensure that anyone with a disability gets the assistance they need, now and in the future."

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## **Ventilator from old car parts? Afghan girls pursue prototype**

By Tameem Akhgar

AP News (19.04.2020) – <https://bit.ly/2KikEJg> – On most mornings, Somaya Farooqi and four other teen-age girls pile into her dad's car and head to a mechanic's workshop. They use back roads to skirt police checkpoints set up to enforce a lockdown in their city of Herat, one of Afghanistan's hot spots of the coronavirus pandemic.

The members of Afghanistan's prize-winning girls' robotics team say they're on a life-saving mission – to build a ventilator from used car parts and help their war-stricken country battle the virus.

“If we even save one life with our device, we will be proud,” said Farooqi, 17.

Their pursuit of a low-cost breathing machine is particularly remarkable in conservative Afghanistan. Only a generation ago, during the rule of the Islamic fundamentalist Taliban in the late 1990s, girls weren't allowed to go to school. Farooqi's mother was pulled from school in third grade.

After the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan in 2001, girls returned to schools, but gaining equal rights remains a struggle. Farooqi is undaunted. “We are the new generation,” she said in a phone interview. “We fight and work for people. Girl and boy, it does not matter anymore.”

Afghanistan faces the pandemic nearly empty-handed. It has only 400 ventilators for a population of more than 36.6 million. So far, it has reported just over 900 coronavirus cases, including 30 deaths, but the actual number is suspected to be much higher since test kits are in short supply.

Herat province in western Afghanistan is one of the nation's hot spots because of its proximity to Iran, the region's

epicenter of the outbreak.

This has spurred Farooqi and her team members, ages 14 to 17, to help come up with a solution.

On a typical morning, Farooqi's father collects the girls from their homes and drives them to the team's office in Herat, zigzagging through side streets to skirt checkpoints. From there, another car takes them to a mechanic's workshop on the outskirts of the city.

In Herat, residents are only permitted to leave their homes for urgent needs. The robotics team has a limited number of special permits for cars.

So far, Farooqi's father hasn't been able to get one, but the girls are in a hurry. "We are concerned about security driving out of the city but there is no other option, we have to try to save people's lives," Farooqi said.

At the workshop, the team is experimenting with two different designs, including an open-source blueprint from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The parts being used include the motor of a Toyota windshield wiper, batteries and sets of bag valve masks, or manual oxygen pumps. A group of mechanics helps them build the frame of a ventilator.

Daniela Rus, a professor at MIT, welcomed the team's initiative to develop the prototype. "It will be excellent to

see it tested and locally produced,” she said.

Tech entrepreneur Roya Mahboob, who founded the team and raises funds to empower girls, said she hopes Farooqi’s group will finish building a prototype by May or June. In all, the team has 15 members who work on various projects.

The ventilator model, once completed, would then be sent to the Health Ministry for testing, initially on animals, said spokesman Wahid Mayar.

Farooqi, who was just 14 years old when she participated in the first World Robot Olympiad in the U.S., in 2017, said she and her team members hope to make a contribution.

“Afghans should be helping Afghanistan in this pandemic,” she said. “We should not wait for others.”

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## **Sikhs in Afghanistan a neglected, vanishing minority**

*The most recent attack has been linked to ISIS extremists, but mainstream persecution is the norm*

By Sunil Kukreja

Asia Times (01.04.2020) – <https://bit.ly/2XiVfa4> – The [terrorist attack](#) that killed 27 Sikhs in a centuries-old *gurdwara* (Sikh temple) last week highlighted yet again the continued and systematic decimation of Sikhs and other religious minorities in Afghanistan.

This most recent attack, for which Islamic State (ISIS) has claimed responsibility, represents yet another poignant chapter in a larger narrative of the persistent persecution of Sikhs in Afghanistan. Then the [bomb attack](#) on the mourners of those killed in the Sikh temple that followed was but another painful postscript to the brutal reality of the devastation that has been inflicted on Sikhs in that country.

Once a thriving religious minority, the Sikh population in Afghanistan has over the last couple of decades declined significantly, with current estimates putting the number remaining at between 3,000 and 8,000. Indeed, so desperate has the situation become that there is little doubt that Afghan Sikhs will become little more than another historical footnote to the international community – one that has been conveniently and persistently ignored by governments and international organizations that purport to champion the cause of religious freedom and minority rights.

While some international news outlets did report last week's attacks, it's quite telling that even with the understandable attention of the international community on the Covid-19 pandemic, the persistent persecution of Sikhs in countries like Afghanistan (and in neighboring Pakistan) in essence continues to be ignored by entities such as the United

Nations.

To be sure, decades of war and devastation have taken a toll on the persistence of minorities such as [Sikhs and Hindus in Afghanistan](#), but there is no question that systematic targeting, harassment, intimidation, and violence perpetrated against these minorities has been routinely tolerated, reflecting how a discernible set of practices have been tacitly or otherwise ignored over an extended period in many parts of the country.

While extreme violence of the kind undertaken by ISIS jihadists provides fodder for the narrative that it's extremists who are the source of this persecution of minorities, it also conveniently enables this mainstream misinterpretation to persist unchallenged and unexamined.

Of course, there is the school of thought that the violent attacks by extremists on Sikhs (and Hindus) are a way to exert pressure indirectly on any Indian government entanglement in Afghanistan as well as retaliate against the mistreatment of Muslims in Kashmir or elsewhere in India. But this convenient interpretation doesn't adequately and meaningfully account for the society-wide practices of discrimination, intimidation, mistreatment, and targeting of Sikhs that persists as an embedded aspect of daily life in Afghanistan.

According to one [US government report](#), for example, "only a few places of worship remained open for Sikhs and Hindus, who said they continued to emigrate because of discrimination and the lack of employment opportunities. Hindu and Sikh groups

also reported interference in their efforts to cremate the remains of their dead in accordance with their customs from individuals who lived near cremation sites.” Other forms of systematic and even state-sanctioned discrimination include the illegal appropriation of property owned by Sikhs.

Frankly, it appears that the relative lack of international attention to situations like the systematic targeting of Sikhs and other religious minorities in Afghanistan and Pakistan reflects an apparent political indifference of the establishment international community. Despite repeated reports of attacks and systematic targeting of Sikhs, the UN, for example, continues to show – despite its predictable condemnation – what can only be described as a puzzling disregard for their plight.

On cue, the UN Secretary General’s Office issued the following [statement](#) on the recent attack in Kabul:

“The Secretary General condemns the attack today in Kabul on a Sikh-Hindu temple in which dozens of civilians were killed and injured. He expresses his deepest sympathies to the families of the victims and wishes a speedy recovery to those injured.

“The Secretary General reiterates that attacks against civilians are unacceptable and those who carry out such crimes must be held accountable.

“The United Nations stands in solidarity with the people and the government of Afghanistan and will continue supporting



efforts to bring peace to their country.”

The office of [the Special Rapporteur](#) on Freedom of Religion or Belief within the UN Human Rights Council, for example, is apparently charged with promoting, among other things, “the adoption of measures at the national, regional and international levels to ensure the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of religion or belief.” However, any close scrutiny of its efforts in this regard reveal a shocking neglect particularly with respect to the plight of Sikhs in Afghanistan or [Pakistan](#).

Indeed, the unambiguous, vivid, and steady stream of independent media and other reports of the destruction of *gurdwaras*, or attacks on Sikhs in Afghanistan and Pakistan seem to disappear – curiously and, arguably, conveniently – into the proverbial pile of insignificance.

It seems reasonable to pose the rather obvious question: Under what circumstances exactly might the United Nations, for instance, find it suitable to make its presence and influence felt in such matters, if not in a devastating and oppressive scenario marked by persistent and unyielding persecution of Sikhs in Afghanistan or Pakistan?

Amid the years of indifference to the plight of the Sikhs in Afghanistan, it now is increasingly evident, if it wasn't already before the latest attack, that to continue living in the country is no longer tenable. This latest attack on Afghan Sikhs has underscored their systematic displacement through a wider, long-standing institutional and societal context marked

by hostility toward them.

When it comes to tackling the mistreatment of Sikhs in Afghanistan, it is clear the UN and the wider international community have failed spectacularly.

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## **NPR: Afghan women still being imprisoned for failing virginity tests**

RFERL (28.08.2019) – <https://bit.ly/2lvJtbH> – Afghan women are still being imprisoned for failing virginity tests, despite a nationwide ban on the unscientific practice, U.S. National Public Radio (NPR) reported on August 27.

Farhad Javid, an Islamic policy adviser for Marie Stopes International, a U.S. global family planning organization, told NPR that she and Afghanistan's first lady, Rula Ghani, visited a prison in January where many of the women were being held.

As a result, 190 prisoners were released between January and April, yet more have since been jailed, Javid said.

“Many are kept inside the jail for a year and a half – for nothing,” Javid told NPR in a separate interview.

In 2018, the UN banned the tests, which don't accurately prove if a woman has had sex.

They are "medically unnecessary, and often times painful, humiliating, and the traumatic practice must end," according to the UN.

Afghan families force daughters to take the tests for a variety of reasons.

They are administered as rape tests, or used to determine whether someone can attend school, get married, or hired for a job.

If a daughter fails the test, the police are usually alerted, and the incarceration process begins.

To reduce the practice, Javid this month rolled out training programs that target police and members of the legal community, including judges and the Prosecutor-General's Office.

In May, similar sessions were held in the health-care community to educate medical workers.