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## **Afghan woman shot, blinded, for getting a job**

By Abdul Qadir Sediqi

Reuters (10.11.2020) - <https://reut.rs/2UzFwRq> - The last thing 33-year-old Khatera saw were the three men on a motorcycle who attacked her just after she left her job at a police station in Afghanistan's central Ghazni province, shooting at her and stabbing her with a knife in the eyes.

Waking up in hospital, everything was dark.

"I asked the doctors, why I can't see anything? They told me that my eyes are still bandaged because of the wounds. But at that moment, I knew my eyes had been taken from me," she said.

She and local authorities blame the attack on Taliban militants - who deny involvement - and say the assailants acted on a tip-off from her father who vehemently opposed her working outside the home.

For Khatera, the attack caused not just the loss of her sight but the loss of a dream she had battled to achieve - to have an independent career. She joined the Ghazni police as an officer in its crime branch a few months ago.

"I wish I had served in police at least a year. If this had happened to me after that, it would have been less painful. It happened too soon ... I only got to work and live my dream for three months," she told Reuters.

The attack on Khatera, who only uses one name, is indicative of a growing trend, human rights activists say, of an intense and often violent backlash against women taking jobs, especially in public roles. In Khatera's case, being a police officer could have also angered the Taliban.

The rights activists believe a mix of Afghanistan's conservative social norms and an emboldened Taliban gaining influence while the United States withdraws its troops from the country is driving the escalation.

The Taliban are currently negotiating in Doha, Qatar, with the Afghan government to broker a peace deal in which many expect them to formally return to power, but progress is slow and there has been an uptick in fighting and attacks on officials and prominent women around the country.

In recent months, the Taliban have said they will respect women's rights under Sharia law but many educated women say they have doubts. The insurgent group has opposed a reform to add mother's names to identity cards, one of the first concrete stances they have revealed on women's rights as they engage in the peace process.

"Though the situation for Afghan women in public roles has always been perilous, the recent spike in violence across the country has made matters even worse," said Samira Hamidi, Amnesty International's Afghanistan campaigner. "The great strides made on women's rights in Afghanistan over more than a decade must not become a casualty of any peace deal with the Taliban."

### ***Childhood dream dashed***

Khatera's dream as a child was to work outside the home and after years of trying to convince her father, to no avail, she was able to find support from her husband.

But her father, she said, did not give up on his opposition.

"Many times, as I went to duty, I saw my father following me ... he started contacting the Taliban in the nearby area and asked them to prevent me from going to my job," she said.

She said that he provided the Taliban with a copy of her ID card to prove she worked for police and that he had called her throughout the day she was attacked, asking for her location.

Ghazni's police spokesman confirmed they believed the Taliban were behind the attack and that Khatera's father had been taken into custody. Reuters was unable to reach him directly for comment.

A Taliban spokesman said the group was aware of the case, but that it was a family matter and they were not involved.

Khatera and her family, including five children, are now hiding out in Kabul, where she is recovering and mourning the career she lost.

She struggles to sleep, jumps when she hears a motorbike and has had to cut off contact with her extended family, including her mother, who blame her for her father's arrest. She hopes desperately that a doctor overseas might somehow be able to partially restore her sight.

"If it is possible, I get back my eyesight, I will resume my job and serve in the police again," she said, adding in part she needed an income to avoid destitution. "But the main reason is my passion to do a job outside the home."

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## **Afghan women illegally forced into 'virginity tests'**

By Stefanie Glinski

Thomson Reuters Foundation (19.10.2020) - <https://reut.rs/2HoPC4s> - Women in Afghanistan are being forced to undergo so-called virginity tests, more than two years after a law requiring consent was introduced, researchers said on Thursday.

The test involves a doctor performing an examination to identify whether the hymen - the thin tissue that may partially cover the vagina - is intact, and has been condemned by the United Nations as "painful, humiliating and traumatic".

A study by Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission found forced gynaecological examinations were still being conducted without the consent of the patient or a court order, as required by a 2018 law.

The Commission interviewed 129 women across Afghanistan and found 92% of tests were performed without consent or a court order.

Most of the victims were prisoners, while nine were under police surveillance. Just nine said they had agreed to the examination and one said she had received a court order, said the Commission, which wants the tests to be banned completely.

"Afghan women have always been victims of violence, with women often mistreated due to crimes committed by men," said chairwoman Shaharзад Akbar.

"Compulsory gynaecological examinations are one of the types of violence that have been perpetrated against Afghan women and violate their human dignity by humiliating and insulting them."

Global health and women's rights organisations have called for the practice to be banned, with the World Health Organization calling it a "violation of the victim's human rights.

Medical experts say the test does not prove whether a girl or woman has had sex as the hymen can be torn during physical activity or use of a tampon. Some girls are born without a hymen.

Yet it remains widespread in some countries, including Indonesia, where women applying to the police are often required to undergo tests for “mental health and morality reasons”.

In Iraq, Yazidi women who had been kidnaped by the Islamic State were routinely tested by Kurdish officials until 2016.

Lyla Schwartz, a psychologist who set up a mental health initiative after working with young Afghan women forced to undergo testing, said they were often used to prove intercourse outside of marriage.

“Girls and women feel assaulted and violated – and girls who may have endured traumatic experiences and undergo testing feel assaulted yet again,” she told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

“It is degrading and serves to retraumatise the assault survivor.”

Fatimeh, a woman living in detention who underwent a forced test, said she was “shocked” to discover she had been referred.

“I felt humiliated and insulted. I will never forget the experience,” Fatimeh, whose name has been changed to protect her identity, told the researchers.

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## **In conservative Kandahar, new gym creates safe space for Afghan women**

Reuters (24.09.2020) - <https://reut.rs/3kS9afG> - In Afghanistan’s southern province of Kandahar, rights activist Maryam Durani has found a fresh outlet for her decades of advocacy - a new fitness centre for women.

Durani, 36, is a fierce campaigner for women’s rights in the conservative stronghold where the Islamist Taliban militant group have major sway and take a conservative stance on the position of women, who mostly wear the burqa in public.

She runs a radio station for women, has served on the provincial council and was presented with the International Women of Courage Award by Michelle Obama for in 2012. Last year, Durani switched tack to open a female-only gym, which draws about 50 women attend each day.

“The reaction of the ladies was very positive because they needed it,” she said, shortly after working out with a group of clients. “What bothered me was the reaction of the men...who reacted negatively to our club and even insulted me because they thought our club was in opposition to Sharia.”

With a troop withdrawal signed between the United States and the Taliban, who have fought a bloody war for 19 years, many women in Afghanistan worry the militant group may exert its influence through formal political channels.

When the Taliban ruled the country between 1996 and 2001, they banned education for females and barred women from leaving the house without a male relative.

The group says it has changed but many women remain sceptical.

"My only concern is about their view of women's rights and what freedoms and restrictions they will impose on me," said Durani.

For now, her focus is on serving the dozens of women who attend the club, whom she describes as a cross-section of society including housewives and women who work outside the home.

"My only wish is to be seen as a human in this society," she said.

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## **Afghanistan to appoint female deputy governors, starting with President's home province**

Radio Free Afghanistan RFE/RL (09.07.2020) - <https://bit.ly/3ewMGO1> - A new decree from Afghan President Ashraf Ghani states that all of the country's 34 provinces will appoint women as deputy governors.

Syed Shah Saqim, a spokesman for the Independent Directorate of Local Governance (IDLG), said the appointment will start with the southeastern province of Logar, home province of the Afghan president.

Speaking to Radio Free Afghanistan on July 9, Saqim said the appointment of female deputies in all provinces has begun. "One of the women is set to be appointed as deputy governor today in Logar Province, and this will continue in other provinces, as well," he said.

He added that "after being interviewed by the president, the female deputy governors will be selected and appointed based on merit and competence."

Earlier, presidential spokesman Sediq Sediqqi said the cabinet had decided that women would be appointed deputy governor in every province.

According to information from the president's office, the proposal to elect female deputy governors for all 34 provinces was initiated by the Women's Affairs Ministry and was approved by the cabinet earlier this week.

Vice President Amrullah Saleh also expressed support for including women in high-ranking government positions. In a recent tweet, he stated that "each province, as a MUST, will have a [female] deputy governor. This is part of our structural reform to further empower women."

"This is a quota which has to be implemented in all 34 provinces of Afghanistan," he continued. "It must be done soon. Even if a woman becomes a governor the quota still holds & applies."

Women in Afghanistan have made substantial gains in employment, education, and legal protections since the fall of the hard-line Taliban regime nearly two decades ago. Their regime banned women's employment and education.

However, Afghan women still face numerous challenges because of domestic abuse, discrimination, taboos, and violence.

## **'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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## **Afghan soldier stabs sister in 'honour killing'**

***Former politician from Badakhshan blames police for mishandling the case.***

The National (05.05.20202) - <https://bit.ly/2AjkzmQ> - An Afghan soldier stabbed his teenage sister to death after she rejected a marriage proposal arranged by her family, police said on Tuesday.

The woman, 18, was killed Monday in Baharak district of the north-eastern province of Badakhshan.

Her brother later fled to a Taliban-controlled area, provincial police spokesman Sanaullah Rohani said.

Mr Rohani said the victim was first throttled with a rope then stabbed to death.

He said police had launched a search operation to arrest her brother.

The victim wanted to marry a man she loved but her family wanted her to marry someone else, Badakhshan activist Asifa Karimi said.

"She rejected her family's proposal and handed herself in to the police, but the police gave her back to her family," Ms Karimi said.

"Her brother, a soldier, took her home and killed her brutally in a case of 'honour killing'."

Parts of Afghan society operate under a strict code of "honour" that gives women little or no say in matters such as who they can marry and whether they can get an education.

Fawzia Koofi, a former politician from Badakhshan, blamed the police for mishandling the case.

Many in Afghanistan, including some in the police and judiciary, believe killing is a suitable punishment for women who elope, Ms Koofi said.



"Women in Afghanistan are still the most vulnerable part of society, not only under the Taliban-controlled areas," she said.

During their rule in the late 1990s, the Taliban banned women from working and going to school, and ordered them to be fully covered when leaving their homes.

Activists say violence against women remains common across Afghanistan.

Last year, the country's Human Rights Commission recorded more than 2,700 cases of violence against women in Afghanistan, a 9 per cent increase from 2018.

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## **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/2KikEJq> - 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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## **Women negotiators seeking to preserve rights in Afghan peace talks**

By Abubakar Siddique & Feroza Azizi

RFE/RL (30.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2UMvKfG> - Women named as part of an Afghan delegation tasked with conducting peace talks with the Taliban say they will be attempting to preserve women's rights in complex negotiations with the hard-line Islamist movement aimed at ending four decades of war in Afghanistan.

"We will be aiming to discuss women's citizenship rights, which will cumulatively include all political, social, and economic rights within the framework of a republican [political system]," Habiba Sarabi, a leading member of the Afghan delegation, told Radio Free Afghanistan.

Sarabi, a physician and deputy leader of the government's peace council, says they will be specifically looking to preserve the right to vote, right to candidacy, work, free speech, and all other human and women rights in the peace talks with the Taliban. "We don't expect these issues to be resolved in the coming months because negotiations are a long, drawn-out process," she said.

Factions and politicians supporting the current political system, formally called Afghanistan's Islamic Republic, and the Taliban have already missed the March 10 deadline to begin direct negotiations. The fragile process is threatened by mounting violence and disagreements between the Taliban and the Afghan government, which in turn is facing a political crisis. The global coronavirus pandemic also threatens Afghanistan's future as the country struggles with a lack of healthcare resources and the imminent fallout of global economic decline.

Shahla Fareed, another Afghan peace negotiator, says she hopes her country can avoid a catastrophe by promptly beginning peace negotiations.

"We are likely to face many obstacles in these negotiations, but we hope to convince the Taliban that only Afghans are the victims of war in their country," she told Radio Free Afghanistan. "I demand that both sides conduct these talks in a calm atmosphere."

Fareed, however, acknowledged that they still have no agenda for the talks, which she hopes will be put together by the 21-member delegation. Five of its members are women. She said they would hopefully be able to discuss women's representation, education, work, their participation in security and politics along with guarantees to access healthcare.

So far, the Taliban have vaguely signaled that unlike their hard-line regime in the 1990s, they will be granting women some rights.

"We together will find a way to build an Islamic system in which all Afghans have equal rights, where the rights of women that are granted by Islam -- from the right to

education to the right to work -- are protected," the movement's deputy leader wrote in an op-ed published by the New York Times last month.

On the ground in Afghanistan, however, the Taliban and the Afghan government appeared to be on a trajectory of escalating hostilities. President Ashraf Ghani and his rival former chief executive Abdullah Abdullah have so far failed to agree on power-sharing despite a \$1 billion U.S. aid cut and public frustration with their political conflict.

On March 30, the country's national security council postponed the release of 100 Taliban prisoners. A day earlier, presidential adviser Waheed Omar called on the Taliban "to not make any excuses" after the Taliban refused to deal with the 21-member delegation Kabul announced for holding talks with the insurgents. The Taliban said the team was not inclusive and failed to represent the country's diversity.

The fragile process is also threatened by mounting Taliban attacks on the Afghan forces. The militants killed at least 28 Afghan soldiers in remote provinces in the south and north of the country. The violence escalates amid mounting fears that a coronavirus pandemic might ravage communities across Afghanistan because the war-torn nation's anemic healthcare system might not be able to cope with the pandemic.

Last week, the country's health minister warned as many as 110,000 Afghans will be killed by COVID-19, the disease caused by a coronavirus infection.

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## **A crucial moment for women's rights in Afghanistan**

By Heather Barr

Human Rights Watch (05.03.2020) - <https://bit.ly/2TEjM7r> - This is a moment of both fear and hope for Afghan women — and an urgent time for the world to support their hard-won rights. The Feb. 29 deal between the US and the Taliban could pave the way for a peace that Afghans desperately seek. But there are huge risks for women's rights in this process.

Women have suffered deeply during Afghanistan's 40 years of war, and they desperately long for peace. They have also fought ferociously for equality in the years since the fall of the Taliban government and have made great progress. Today there are women ministers and governors and judges and police and soldiers, and Afghanistan's parliament has a higher percentage of women than does the US Congress.

But Afghan women's rights activists have faced resistance from the Afghan government — and lack of support from international donors — as they fought for their rightful place at the negotiating table for peace talks. This exclusion, combined with the Taliban's relentless discrimination against women and girls, increases fears that women's rights could easily be a casualty of this process.

The US-Taliban deal is focused on foreign troop withdrawal and preventing Taliban support for international terrorism attacks. It also triggers "intra-Afghan" talks between the Taliban, the Afghan government, and other factions, which are slated to start March 10. But women's rights were not included in the Feb. 29 deal. Zalmay Khalilzad, the lead US envoy to the talks, repeatedly said that women's rights — and other issues relating to human rights, political structures and power sharing — should be resolved through the subsequent intra-Afghan talks. This has been a source of frustration to activists.

The Taliban remain deeply misogynistic. Their 1996 to 2001 regime was notorious for denying women and girls access to education, employment, freedom of movement and health care, and subjecting them to violence including public lashing or execution by stoning. Taliban rhetoric and conduct has moderated somewhat in subsequent years, with some Taliban commanders permitting girls to attend primary schools, typically in response to community pressure. But the Taliban also continue to carry out violent attacks against girls' schools and block women and girls from exercising many of their basic rights, and remain deeply opposed to gender equality.

In February, a Taliban leader wrote, "[W]e together will find a way to build an Islamic system in which all Afghans have equal rights, where the rights of women that are granted by Islam — from the right to education to the right to work — are protected." Skeptics noted the comma separating women from equal rights, and that from 1996 to 2001 the Taliban also argued that women were enjoying all rights "granted by Islam."

The Afghan government has been an unreliable supporter — and sometimes even an enemy — of women's rights. The administrations of both Afghan President Hamid Karzai and Ashraf Ghani have frequently brushed aside women's rights. Both have mostly rebuffed activists' demands for women to have full participation in the peace process, as provided under United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325. Foreign donors have been more willing to engage in photo ops and grant agreements than to expend political capital to press for Afghan women to be in the room, at the table, during negotiations.

Lack of clarity about the intra-Afghan talks and the designated negotiators has further heightened fears about the implications for women's rights. Political infighting following the disputed Afghan presidential election has delayed the appointment of the government negotiation team. Pressure to divvy up these roles among power brokers threatens to squeeze women out. The absence of clear information about what country will host the talks and who will facilitate them prevents women's rights activists from lobbying for including women.

A fight over whether a release of prisoners will move ahead is muddying the waters further and calling into question the timeline for the intra-Afghan talks. Meanwhile, violence, reduced ahead of the deal's signing, threatens to escalate again.

Several years back it was common to hear Afghan feminists argue that there should be no negotiations with the Taliban — a group that refused to recognize women's full humanity. Today those calls are all but gone. Even the staunchest women's rights activists have mostly accepted that there is no path to peace in Afghanistan but through negotiations with the Taliban.

But protecting women's rights needs to be one of the key objectives of this process, and for that to happen, women need to be at the negotiating table. Governments increasingly recognize that the role of women in peace processes is not just an afterthought, but critical to sustainable and implementable peace accords. The Afghan government and all its international partners need to back Afghan women, who are in the fight of their lives.

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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.

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## **2 in 3 Afghan men think women have too many rights: report**

### ***Elders are less reluctant to gender equality.***

Global Citizen (30.01.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2IAensG> - Afghan men strongly oppose giving women more freedom — 2 in 3 think they have too much already — and young men are even more reluctant than their elders, a survey said on Tuesday.

Nor are women fully on board with the idea of parity.

Almost 1 in 3 of the Afghan women surveyed think women already have a surfeit of rights and a similar proportion say they are "too emotional" to be leaders.

The male generational gap may be explained by younger men seeking rigid gender roles as they struggle to find work and stability in a country ravaged by war and poverty, said gender equality group Promundo.

Religious teachings against women's rights under the Taliban regime had also played a role in hardening views among younger men, said Gary Barker, founder of Promundo-US, which works with men and boys to promote gender equality.



The survey was organised by Promundo and UN Women, the United Nations equality agency.

"It is pretty concerning," Barker told the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

"It says something about the precarious state of a big group of young men who don't know what to hang their identity on."

The survey comes amid peace talks between the United States and the Taliban — which controls nearly half of Afghanistan — that may help end war after nearly two decades of conflict.

Afghanistan is not an easy place to be a woman, with forced marriage, domestic violence and high maternal mortality rates, particularly in rural areas, according to equality advocates.

Between 1996 and 2001, under the Taliban government, women were banned from work, made to wear a full-length burqa that covered their face and not allowed out without a male relative.

Women's rights have improved in recent years under the Western-backed Afghan government, especially in cities such as the capital Kabul, where many women work outside the home and more than a quarter of the parliament is female.

### **Gender gap**

However, the survey of 2,000 adults pointed to a gulf in attitudes between men and women.

About two-thirds of men thought women in Afghanistan had too many rights and that women were too emotional to become leaders, compared to less than a third of women.

And while nearly three-quarters of women said a married woman should have equal rights with their partner to work outside the home, only 15 percent of men agreed.

More than half of men also agreed with the statement that "more rights for women mean that men lose out."

Barker said investment in girls' education and empowerment would "hit a wall if we don't also worry about the hearts and minds of men".

The report's authors called for action, including education programmes promoting gender equality, work with progressive religious leaders and support for youth campaigns on the issue.

"Conflict, physical and financial insecurity, and lack of education act as drivers of harmful gender attitudes and practices in Afghanistan, and perpetuate the cycles of violence against women in Afghanistan," said Najia Nasim, executive director of Women for Afghan Women.

The civil society group urged more work at a grassroots level to drive forward gender equality.

## **Women concerned over their rights post peace deal**

***A number of women said the Taliban should promise to respect women's rights after joining the peace process.***

By Haseba Atakpal

Tolo News (29.01.2019) - <https://bit.ly/2FXNnTI> - A number of Afghan women on Tuesday said Taliban should promise that once a peace deal is reached with the Afghan government, they will not scrap or violate women's rights.

Based on statistics, 30 percent of university graduates are now women and every year 100,000 female students graduate from school.

Also, in total there are 756 female journalists working in the media in the country.

The women said these are the achievements that they are worried might be ignored in a post-peace deal government.

The women said the Taliban should respect women's rights and respect the past achievements.

Arezo Shinwari, one of the women, said when Taliban took over Kabul she was a Grade 4 student in Kabul.

Then she, along with her family, moved to Pakistan where she continued her education and gained a master's degree.

Now she works for a company in Kabul and said she is worried if Taliban return she might not be able to continue her job.

"All our demands should be considered in the peace process. This is what all the Afghan women want," said Shinwari.

Hashima Sharif is a resident of eastern Nangarhar province and works in a government department there.

She said the Taliban must promise that they will respect women's rights if there is a peace deal.

"Government should be very serious in the peace process. Those who want to make peace with us, should consider our national interests 100 percent," said Sharif.

These women also said they have not been given an important role in the peace talks.

Responding to the women's concerns, Hasina Safi, a member of the government's negotiating team said women's demands will be considered in the talks.

"Women are a big part of society and we cannot ignore them. They have their influence in the peace process and they are involved in the process," said Safi.

These latest remarks come on the heels of six days of talks between the US and Taliban last week in Qatar where the two sides reportedly agreed on some issues.

## Taliban floggings hint at crackdown on smartphones

By Frud Bezhani

RFERL (20.10.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2AP4Dqo> - The scenes of a public flogging in a Taliban stronghold in northern Afghanistan showed two women in blue burqas kneeling nearly motionless as a man beat them over their heads and bodies with a cane.

The women, whose names have not been released, had been found guilty of breaking the Taliban's strict interpretation of Shari'a law after police said they visited a local health clinic without a male relative being present. They were also said to have been seen by Taliban fighters communicating on mobile phones.

While the fundamentalist Taliban has long forced women to be accompanied by a male relative when venturing outside their homes, reports of the second charge appear to point to the recent enforcement of strictures on the use of mobile devices, particularly smartphones, in militant-controlled areas.

It was unclear if the women, both of whom were married, were punished simply for using the phones or specifically for communicating with men outside their immediate families -- a charge that has led to public floggings in the past.

While men on mobile devices are a common sight, local conservative culture frequently frowns on women using mobile phones in public.

### ***Fear of drone strikes, surveillance***

Obaid Ali, an expert on the Afghan insurgency at the Afghanistan Analysts Network, an independent think tank in Kabul, says the Taliban's cultural commission banned all fighters from using smartphones in 2016 for security and religious reasons. Since then, Ali says, the militants have enforced the ban on civilians in some areas under their control. But he says primitive mobile phones without Internet access or the ability to record images or video are tolerated in many of those same locations, which frequently lack fixed-line telephone services.

"One of the main reasons the Taliban banned smartphones was because of the growing threat of U.S. drone strikes and surveillance," says Ali. "The Taliban also fears smartphones being used among civilians because people can access independent information, take photos and videos, and might give away the militants' activities and locations."

The Taliban has restricted mobile-phone use in most areas under its control. In parts of the southern Helmand Province, mobile phones and the Internet are banned. Taliban fighters communicate via walkie-talkies.

In the northern Kunduz Province, where Taliban fighters control several districts, the group has forced mobile service providers to switch off coverage every day between 6:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m.

## ***Brutal punishments***

It was unclear if the women who were flogged in Jawzjan were using smartphones.

The incident occurred in the Beron Sena area of the Darzab district, a former stronghold of the Islamic State (IS) extremist group, which was ousted from the area by the rival Taliban and government forces in August.

Mohammad Ismail, Darzab's chief of police, this week confirmed that the floggings had taken place and said the incident occurred about 10 days ago. He said the women had since returned to their homes.

The news of the floggings only reached mainstream Afghan media on October 28. Videos purportedly showing the punishments have since been widely shared on social media.

## ***'Moral crimes'***

This is not the first time the Taliban, which ruled the country from 1996 to 2001, has meted out public punishments for so-called moral crimes.

In the northern province of Faryab, a young girl was publicly flogged in a market last month for not being accompanied by a male relative.

Moral offenses, including adultery or even running away from home, are not considered crimes under the Afghan Criminal Code. But hundreds of women and girls have nevertheless been imprisoned after "immorality" verdicts by courts dominated by religious conservatives.

In some rural areas, where Taliban militants exert considerable influence, residents view government bodies as corrupt or unreliable and turn to Taliban courts to settle disputes. The Taliban courts employ Shari'a law, which prescribes public flogging, stoning, or execution for men or women found guilty of having a relationship outside marriage or an extramarital affair and for women who had contact with men outside their immediate families.

Recent years have seen a spate of chilling public punishments of women accused of such offenses.

In February 2017, an armed mob killed an 18-year-old woman and the man she had eloped with in the eastern Nuristan Province.

In October 2015, 19-year-old Rokhsana was stoned to death by Taliban militants in the central Ghor Province after being accused of having premarital sex.

In November 2015, a 26-year-old Afghan woman died of her injuries after being publicly lashed, also in Ghor. She had been accused of running away from home.

In August 2016, also in Ghor Province, a young man and woman found guilty of having sex outside marriage were publicly lashed.

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## **Afghan refugee gets life sentence for so-called 'honor killing' of sister**

RFE/RL (22.08.2018) - <https://bit.ly/2Lim2JT> - A young Afghan refugee in Austria has received a sentence of life in prison for stabbing his sister to death in a so-called "honor killing."

A court in Vienna issued the sentence on August 22 against the Afghan man, who said he stabbed his sister 28 times "because of culture" in order to protect what he said was his family's sense of honor.

Authorities have not released the name of the killer or his sister, who was 14 years old when she was bludgeoned to death on her way to school in September 2017.

The victim had moved into a crisis center in Vienna about a week before she'd been killed, saying that she felt cornered and "pressured" by her family because she was not allowed to go out and meet with her girlfriends.

The court heard that when the killer confessed to police, he told authorities: "It is good that she is dead. She stained our family's honor."

The killer claimed that under Austria law, he should not receive a life sentence because he is now only 19 years old.

But the court rejected that claim after a panel of experts testified that he is 21 years old.

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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\*\*](#)

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## **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.

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## **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."