

# Achieving Gender Equality in Afghanistan By 2020

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### ABSTRACT

*Women form 50 percent of the Afghan population and the stability of this nation will be best reflected only by an improvement in their condition since they have always been subjected to any change, turmoil and cultural and religious norms prevailing in the country. Gender equality refers to a concept that all men and women, are free to develop according to their personal capabilities and can also make their choices irrespective of the hindrances posed by traditional gender rules, prejudices etc. Therefore, gender equality deciphers an equal level of consideration for all human needs and aspiration. However, in the case of Afghanistan, achieving gender equality is a target that needs tons of effort to realize.*

*This paper also discusses Afghanistan's efforts to achieving gender equality in light of Millennium Development Goals, actions, progresses and challenges. Equality is an ideal term and in Afghanistan, which has been a victim of conflicts, terrorism and religious fundamentalism for decades, it becomes more important to change the hierarchy of societal structure to involve women in the process of its reconstruction. The paper analyses gradual changes in the status of women in Afghanistan and their visibility in different arenas to assess the present scenario and future prospects.*

### KEYWORDS:

Gender Equality, Afghan women, Millennium Development Goals (MDG), Violence Against Women (VOA), Sharia law

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## Introduction

This paper discusses Afghanistan's efforts to achieving gender equality in light of Millennium Development Goals, actions, progresses and challenges. Equality is an ideal term and in Afghanistan, which has been a victim of conflicts, terrorism and religious fundamentalism for decades, it becomes more important to change the hierarchy of societal structure to involve women in the process of its reconstruction. The paper analyses gradual changes in the status of women in Afghanistan and their visibility in different arenas to assess the present scenario and future prospects.

## Materials and methods-

To indicate the real condition of women, gender inequality and progress, data on women's life expectancy, literacy level, participation in different sectors of jobs, Violence against women and the legal system and women's access to justice have been used are used the sources-Afghan Human Development Report, UN reports and data from Afghan ministries. This paper uses empirical data and analytical approach to access Afghanistan's position in terms of gender equality and MDG.

## Discussion

### *1.1 Gender Equality and Millennium Development Goals*

Gender equality refers to a concept that all men and women, are free to develop according to their personal capabilities and can also make their choices irrespective of the hindrances posed by traditional gender rules, prejudices etc. Therefore, gender equality deciphers an equal level of consideration for all human needs and aspiration. According to the United Nations [UN], gender equality is the first and foremost human right. Since human society has been discriminating against women, the UN emphasizes on empowering women to bring gender equality and accelerate development. This is why gender equality has been acknowledged as a key to development and being included as part of UN's eight Millennium Development Goals. For any country, it is necessary to bring women into the process of development in all political, social and economic spheres so the inequality between men and women does not perpetuate further.

**Millennium Development Goals** are set measurable targets to enable people to enjoy the minimum requirement of a dignified life. In the Millennium Summit of the United Nations in 2000, all 193 members adopted United Nations Millennium Declaration and agreed to achieve eight goals by the year 2015.

1. Eradicating extreme poverty and hunger,
2. Achieving universal primary education,
3. Promoting gender equality and empowering women
4. Reducing child mortality rates,
5. Improving maternal health,
6. Combating HIV/aids, malaria, and other diseases,
7. Ensuring environmental sustainability, and
8. Developing a global partnership for development

Ironically Afghanistan was suffering from war when in September 2000, the Millennium Summit was held in UN General Assembly in New York, and thus could not participate in the formulation of the MDGs. For Afghanistan, decades of conflict have made it more difficult to

attain those goals in comparison to other countries of the world. So on the basis of political, economic, social conditions, governance and security framework existing in the country the MDG targets have been tailored to the realities and set for 2020 instead of 2015. Afghanistan government also gives special emphasis on Gender mainstreaming i.e. to bring women at par with men in every spectrum of life. As the Afghanistan Ministry of Women Affairs [MOWA] states, “When a woman becomes educated, she knows how to raise her children and she will bring up good and knowledgeable children in society, and when we have good and educated generations so we will have a healthy society. The ministry further says, “When Afghan women are daughters, they care a lot for their fathers, when they are wives, they take care of their husbands, and when they are sisters they take care of their brothers. If the government pays more attention to women in every field of life and helps them to improve, then the future of the country will be bright. Our Great Prophet Mohammad said that we should give good discipline to our daughters because they will be mothers in the future. “

Achieving the MDGs in Afghanistan is not just a desirable developmental goal, but a necessity for the security of the country, the region and the world. Under the third target of eliminating gender disparity following are the necessary steps for Afghanistan indicated under MDGs:

- Eliminate gender disparity in all levels of education no later than 2020, this includes- Ratio of girls to boys in primary, secondary and tertiary education and improve the ratio of literate females to males (15- to 24-year-olds)
- To reduce gender inequality in economic sector, it is recommended to increase the number of female employees
- The MDG suggests increase female participation in elected bodies and in all levels of government to 30% by 2020.
- In order to improve women's status in terms of access to justice the MDG targets reducing gender inequality by 50% by 2015 and 100% by 2020. This can be achieved by restructuring and amending laws to further protect women's rights according to the provisions of the Constitution of Afghanistan. The UN also recommends criminalization of violence against women in all forms.
- Bringing gender equality is vital for Afghanistan so that it would be able to utilize half of its human resource towards country's progress. As US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said in her own speech on December 19, 2011, "... women are too often excluded from both the negotiations that make peace and the institutions that maintain it. Now of course, some women wield weapons of war – that's true – and many more are victims of it. But too few are empowered to be instruments of peace and security. That is an unacceptable waste of talent and of opportunity for the rest of us as well..... ensuring that relief and recovery efforts address the distinct needs of women and girls who are the linchpins of families and communities and invaluable partners in stabilizing countries scarred by conflict. This is crucial because humanitarian crises caused by conflict can be just as dangerous as the fighting itself and can sow the seeds of future instability. Women are often among the most vulnerable in crises, yet they rarely receive a proportionate share of assistance or have the chance to help set post-conflict priorities. But with the right

*tools and support, women can lead recovery efforts and help get their communities back on their feet....”<sup>2</sup>*

### Area of study: Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a country with a myriad history inflicted with conflicts among different ethnic groups, wars and political turmoil so much so that the country can not be termed as a nation in true sense rather a conglomerate of diverse ethnic groups striving together to retain their sovereignty. Afghanistan has diverse ethnic groups of which Pashtuns are most dominant. Others are Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, Turkmen. The ethnic identities are more visible than the common national identity of Afghan. So the values and norms followed by ethnic communities are considered far above the national laws and modern values of liberation, democracy and equality.

### Historical Background:

The earliest history begins from Persian occupancy to Indian rule of Mouryas, Kushans and advent of Buddhism Afghans

always showed high resistance to foreign elements. Mahmud of Gazna, Changhiz Khan and Tomur as well as Babur are some names Kabul has always been proud of. Ahmad Shah Durrani was the first tribal leader to unite entire Afghanistan. In the course of the British annexation of Afghanistan in early 19th century, Afghans gave the imperial power a tough challenge in the First Anglo-Afghan war when around 16000 soldiers and campers of the British army were crushed by the guerilla warriors amid the high rugged mountains. Second Anglo-Afghan war gave Britishers a better chance in 1878 to run puppet governments then after. Both Russia and Britishers kept Afghanistan as a buffer state between their colonial empires in Central Asia and South Asia and by 1893 Durand Line was established demarcating the Afghan boundary in the south. Third Afghan War in the beginning of the 20th century gave Afghanistan freedom with the ‘Treaty of Rawalpindi’ in 1907 yet its dependence on foreign aid and assistance did not keep Afghan rulers completely free and in 1979 the Soviet Union attacked. Since then, Afghanistan has experience continuing political and economic instability with foreign pressure,

external agencies inflicting internal conflicts by providing aid to rebels and surge of religious fundamentalism adding to the sufferings of the common mass, especially women. The Taliban took charge of the country in 1998 and till 2001, the world seemed indifferent to the plight of Afghanistan suffering under religious propaganda and fundamentalist rule. It was only 9/11 attack on US that awakened the superpower to begin a full swing war against terrorism and reconstruction of war-torn Afghanistan began with the elimination of the Taliban. In the era Post 2001, a new phase began in 2004 after democratic elections when Hamid Karzai became the president of Afghanistan. With full support of billions of dollars flowing through foreign aid, development projects and military assistance, Afghanistan is slowly proceeding on the path of development. According to the Ministry of Women Affairs Afghanistan, the current status of women there is a serious challenge. They are poor in health, deprived of their basic fundamental rights, highly vulnerable with low educational level and less access to employment. An average Afghan woman dies at the age of 44 years. The sex ratio is

low [104 men to 100 women of all ages] despite the fact that there is a high level of casualties due to prolonged war period.

### **Change in women's status-**

But women were not always that vulnerable in Afghanistan. In 1880, Mallali, a small village woman fought the Britishers in the battle of Maiwand becoming an Afghan Joan of Arc whereas today women are not recommended to go out in Afghanistan without a male escort. Even in 1964, when the first Constitution was drafted women participated in the process and by 1970 three women were in Parliament too. Even in early 1990, women were quite visible working as teachers, government workers, lawyers, judges, doctors and journalists in Afghanistan<sup>3</sup> Even in 1960, women were very participating in government's rural development programmes. Women medical professionals were sent to remote areas to take care of rural health issues. But the condition of women had deteriorated in Soviet era itself. The Taliban played a major role in the disappearance of women. Since 1996, they

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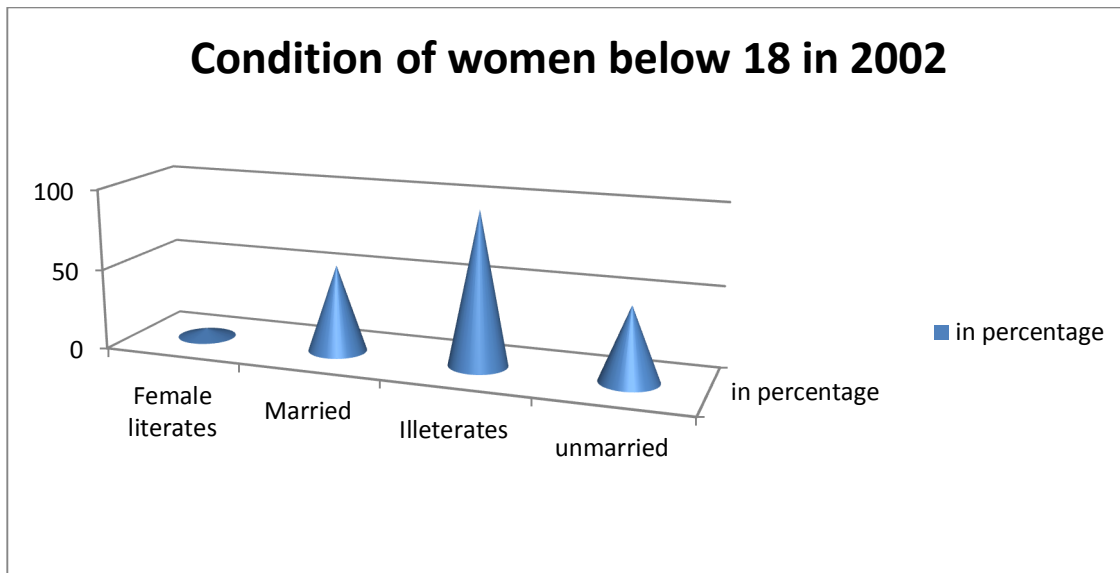
<sup>3</sup> A History of Women in Afghanistan: Then and Now, Mohadesa Najumi, Comment Middle East, Online Magazine

were marginalized and human rights were violated. They were barred from attending schools, colleges and jobs. Even in 2001, a decree issued by the Taliban stated that women were barred from driving cars. The punishments for violating the ruthless Taliban rules were quite severe. Women were beaten in public and were forced to prostitution.

### Problems and challenges

Today, when the entire country is striving hard to come out of the aftermath of the Taliban, women find themselves lagging behind with a 14 % literacy rate, and 80% of them still unable to get access to education. Gender Inequality- The gender development index (GDI) is adjusted human development indicators in order to show disparities between men and women

with respect to 3 indicators: life expectancy and health, knowledge, and standard of living. Afghanistan's gender development index-GDI is – at.310, one of the lowest in the world. According to the Canadian Government's Parliamentary Information and Research service, women's condition in Afghanistan deteriorated during the Soviet era and civil wars worsened the situation. A report by OXFAM shows women were not allowed to work outside their houses under the Taliban regime, girls' schools were shut down and Burqa was made compulsory for every woman. The report further says that Afghanistan was ranked second highest in terms of maternal mortality in 2002 and every year it lost 15,000 women dying during childbirth.



Condition of women: Source-Oxfam, 2002

The combined efforts of the Afghanistan government, international agencies and foreign assistance, the status of women is being uplifted. They are gradually brought back to the mainstream of society, yet in a 2011 survey by the Thomson Reuters Foundation identified Afghanistan as the most dangerous place for women as there are still high mortality rates, limited access to doctors and a lack of economic rights were among the dangers faced by women, in addition to “continuing conflict, NATO air strikes, and cultural practices”. UNIFEM says that 87% of women face abuse and violence in Afghanistan. Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported that, in areas under Taliban control, women are facing constant threats, intimidation and

violence. Girls’ schools – and girls themselves – have been targeted along with female political leaders and activists, several of whom have reportedly been murdered. Oxfam says, “... *though women have gained access to many positions they are still far from being decisive bodies*”. In 2004 there were three female ministers, but it decreased to 1 in 2011. This is attributed to the constant threats by fundamentalist forces which still bother women. In 2006, the number of women had arisen in civil services to 31%, but ironically, it dropped back to 18.5% in 2010. Region wise also the participation of women in elections varies greatly. In 2010, it was only 2% in Helmand and Uruzgan witnessed only 7% women.



## Social sector

**Education-** A review of regional comparison of primary school completion rate for girls and progress toward the MDG goals showed that Afghanistan is the only country out of total 16 countries, which was ranked as **seriously off track**. To achieve gender equality, Afghanistan needs to ensure that for every 3 boys, it has to enroll 5 girls at primary level and 3 girls for every single boy at secondary level, then only it can reach near MDG. As the Afghan Ministry of Education reports in 2007, 40% of Afghan girls reach primary school completion, however only 5% girls complete secondary level school. Only 12.6% of girls above 14 can read and write whereas the percentage of literate men in the same terms is 23%. Poverty, child marriages, fearful environment and reluctance of families to allow girls to attend school are the reasons behind such disparities. Though girl's have gained more access to education in urban areas, overall school enrollment rates at all levels are 41.8% for females and 73.7% for males.

## Women and Health:

An average Afghan woman lives only up to 42 years, whereas globally women

enjoy a better life expectancy than men. In terms of sex ration, Afghan men outnumber women with an average of 104 men to 100 in all age groups. The maternal mortality rate in Afghanistan is 1600 deaths per 100,000 live births. Women's fertility rates in Afghanistan is one of the highest in the world. An NGO-CWS working in Afghanistan reported most of women are deprived of Folic acid and iron, fruits and vegetables in Afghanistan and a majority of them suffer from hypertension, iron deficiency and anemia. **The sex ratio** is also very low. While at birth it is 1.05. for age group under 15, it is 1.03. Number of males per 100 females is higher even in the age group of 15-64 and 65 and above, thus showing that the present negative sex ratio is not an outcome of recent miseries rather women have always been lower in number in Afghanistan. Despite some improvement in child mortality, Afghanistan remains with one of the highest Infant Mortality Rate of the world. Total Fertility Rate in Afghanistan is quite high-6.6 while global average for TFR is only 2.68 [2002-05]. The women of Afghanistan are highly vulnerable to diseases due to lack of access to health facilities. Only 23%

women used contraceptives [2006-10], 36% women have anti-natal insurance coverage. Only 35% females of Afghanistan are able to receive skilled attendant while giving birth and in rural areas this data goes further down to 5%. [United Nations]

### **Maternal Mortality-**

In 2007-10, 1600 deaths were reported due to complication of maternity. *Every hour 2 women die from pregnancy or childbirth complications; 1 in 4 children dies before reaching the age of five from preventable and curable diseases; at least 8 of the country's 29 million people are food insecure; 70 percent of Afghans lack access to safe drinking water (IRIN).* Because of high fertility, most of women are deprived of economic opportunities as their working age is spent mostly in rearing 4-5 or more children. It is considered culturally inappropriate to consult a male doctor even in emergency situations. Tough weather, difficult terrain and heavy snowfall make it more difficult for women to get quick access to health services.

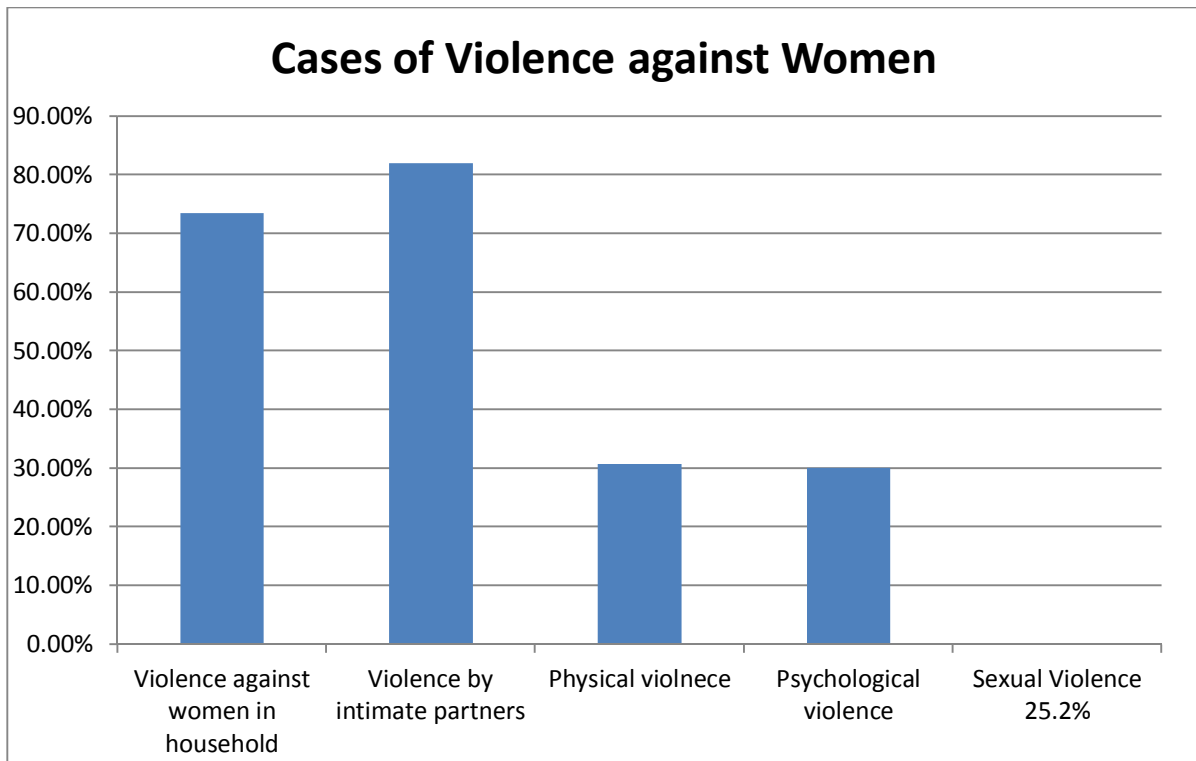
### **Economic Sector**

Afghan government conducted the National Risk and Vulnerability Assessment (NRVA) in collaboration with the European Union. This assessment reflected that, women's labour force participation rate was just 47% whereas than men's was 86%. The report says that women face lots of challenges in earning their livelihood and most of their activities are confined to household works, agricultural activities and animal husbandry. Eighty to 90% of economic activities for women are limited to informal sector and discriminatory wages make it more difficult for women to meet their ends.

## Violence against women

Violence against women is widespread in Afghanistan. This includes physical and psychological harassment, marital rapes, and domestic violence. Many women commit suicide to avoid violence. Negligence of women's health, malnutrition and no access to health care add to their trauma. According to the Human Development Report, 2007, Afghan women go through a lot of human rights violations and most of them are denied justice. Sixty to 80% women have either been forced into marriage or were married in their childhood. The report considers that wars, and feeling of insecurity has led to failure to protect women in the society and thus more restrictions have been imposed upon them.

- Every 30 minutes, an Afghan woman dies during childbirth
- 87 % of Afghan women are illiterate
- 30 % of girls have access to education in Afghanistan
- 1 in every 3 Afghan women experience physical, psychological or sexual violence
- 44 years is the average life expectancy for women in Afghanistan
- 70 - 80 % of women face forced marriages.
  - (Source: IRIN, 2007 )



Source: UNIFEM, May 2006

### Afghan Laws and Women

Afghanistan’ constitution and laws are very unfair to women. Female victims and defendants are most of the time not even allowed access to justice. The Bonn Accord was formed by the UN Peace Negotiation in Bonn [Germany] in 2001. It outlined goals for Afghan women to provide right to vote for women in elections, serve in government, allocate seats for women in parliament. By 2004 Afghan Constitution & Afghan Compact of 2006, these provisions have been

formalized yet the reality is that women are allowed to vote yet not to decide whom to vote. Among students of Kabul and Balks universities, 25% are women, yet only 3% of judges are female.

**Constitutional Loya Jirga [January 2004]** enshrines ‘Fundamental Rights and Duties of Citizens’-Article 22 states- the citizens of Afghanistan-whether men or women- have equal rights and duties before the law. However, in the same constitution, Article 3 contradicts Article 22 stating that “no law can be contrary to the beliefs and provisions of the sacred

religion of Islam.” Thus the constitution itself leaves loops for discriminatory application. Sharia Law has already been given a legal framework in 2006. President Karzai passed a proposal arising from the Ulema Council of Clerics that the Department for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice be reestablished. It was the same department used by the Taliban to brutally crush Afghan women in the name of religion. There are three legal systems operating in Afghanistan: **State system, Sharia Laws and Customery and Tribal codes like Pashtunwali.** According to Oxfam, A woman running away from her family to avoid violence is not considered a criminal under the Afghan Penal Code but *Sharia law* would consider it a crime. In 2011, a *BBC* report said, a 15-year-old Afghan girl, Sahar Gul, was married off at the age of 14 to a 30-year-old man who then severely beat her and confined her to a windowless basement with limited food and water for five months after she refused to become a prostitute. Similarly, *the BBC* reported in 2010 that a husband cut off the nose and ears of Aisha, an 18-year-old Afghan girl, with the approval of local Taliban commander because she had run

away from her abusive husband. During the Karzai regime there has been significant changes in women’s condition yet the deep-rooted societal traditions pull women to retain themselves behind the doors. Human Rights Watch released a report, which revealed that nearly half of all women in Afghan prisons are being held for "moral crimes" such as running away from home or adultery and that Afghanistan is “the only country in the world that interprets sharia law to prohibit women from running away from their home without permission.” *Asian Foundation’s survey in 2006* stated that ‘women remain oppressed and discriminated in healthcare and education sector. Women obeyed the rules of wearing burqa and this shows that Afghanistan is a country deeply rooted in traditions.

## Measures to achieve Gender Equality

### **Institutional- Government agencies, Plans and policies-**

Many programs and policies have been formulated under the reconstruction program in Afghanistan under the Bonn Accords. These goals were formalized in the 2004 Afghanistan Constitution and the Afghanistan Compact of 2006. The Afghan Constitution ensures equal rights for both men and women. To meet the goal of Gender Quality in tune with the MDG. Article 43 and Article 44 of the constitution ensures women's right to education and Article 48 enshrines their right to work. The government also launched a 10-year National Action Plan for Women (NAPWA) that was implemented from 2008. In addition to the legal documents noted above, the Afghanistan National Development Strategy (ANDS) has been incorporated with a "Gender Equality Cross Cutting Strategy" (AGE-CCS).

### **Ministry of Women Affairs- [MoWA]**

has also adopted a three-pillar strategy to ensure the government vision is achieved: (i) elimination of all forms of violence against women; (ii) human resource

development; and (iii) facilitating women's participation in social and political affairs. MoWA facilitates setting up of gender focal points, establish partnership, pilot and develop projects, collaborate with NGOs and monitor government actions.

### Afghanistan Independent Human Rights

Commission- Constitution of Afghanistan formed Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission [AIHRC] to monitor human rights and promote their protection and advancement. It is also responsible to protect women's rights and eliminate discrimination against women. Apart from this Afghanistan is also a member of many other human right bodies, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). In 2009 the Law on Elimination of Violence against Women was passed that criminalizes selling of women for marriage or for dispute resolution, criminalizes forced and child marriages.

**International Assistance-** Development projects by other nations to empower women, NGOs and international organization initiatives-

1. **UNIFEM-** United Nations Development Fund for Women works for bringing gender equality and improving the condition of women through various programmes. This includes supporting government actions to implement policies to bring gender equality, employ women as peace builders, eliminate violence against women and create livelihood opportunities for them. Norway and Sweden fund UNIFEM.
2. **UNICEF** United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund has initiated many Basic education programmes and gender equality projects in Afghanistan to improve literacy rates among women between 15-49 years.
3. **UNESCO [United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization]**'s project- A Lifeline for Afghan Women has also been allowed to work in areas where the Taliban still have control. Their program is promoted literacy and to make women aware of health issues through radio soap and cartoon magazine
4. **Afghan Women's Network-** AWN is an NGO with members from 29 provinces of Afghanistan, aimed to encourage women's participation in Peace jirga and elections.

This is supported by Finland, Norway and Denmark.

5. **DA Qanoon Ghustonky** is another Afghan NGO training defense lawyers to promote access to justice for women.
6. **Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA)** is addressing many women's issues in Afghanistan. It is supporting a micro financing program of the Afghan government. It also funds projects to advocate women's rights with \$14.5 million investment in training 9000 teachers, of which 4000 will be women.

## Results:

### Achievements

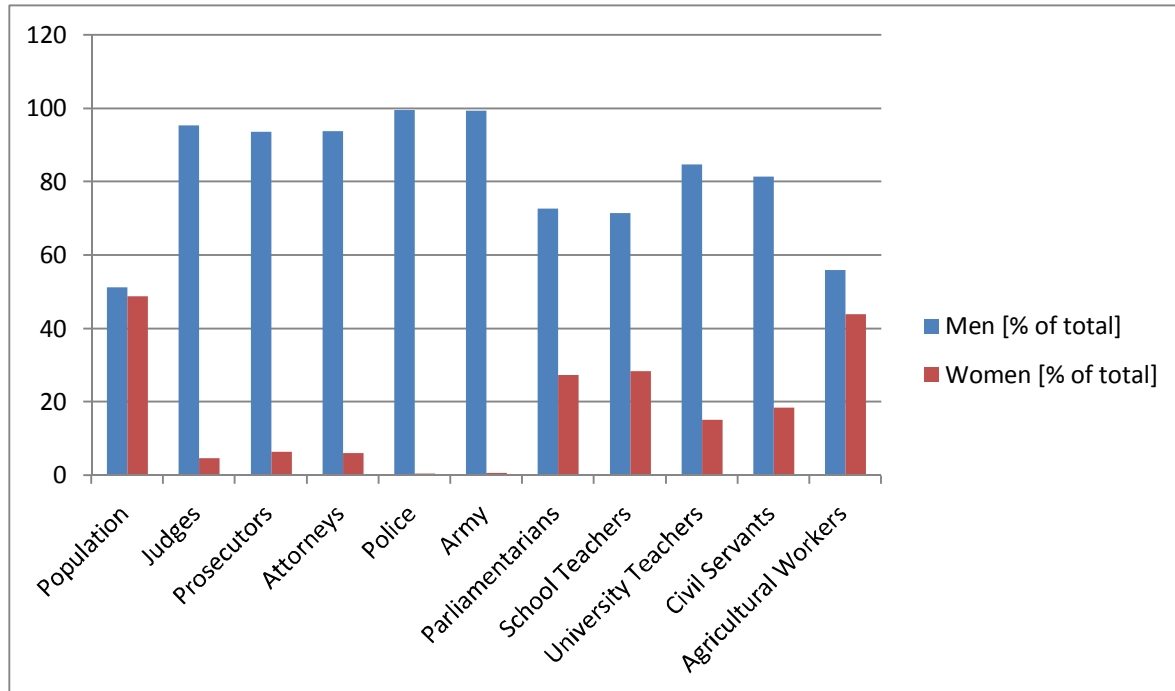
In comparison to last decade, condition of women has changed a lot now. Afghanistan's ministry of Education had very enthusiastically declared the improvements registered in April 2008 stating that 5.4 million children have been enrolled in school of which 35% were girls. Though, in the same year the Taliban made an attack in November in Kandhar pouring acid on school girls. The government of Afghanistan has embraced laws to protect women's rights and has also signed on to international treaties

pertaining to women's rights. In 2009 Elimination of Violence against Women (EVAW) law was adopted that criminalizes all violence against women. Oxfem reports significant increase in the no. of female police officers, judges. Many women's shelters have been opened and assistance is given to help women get access to justice.

- In 1977 Meena Keshawar, an Afghan women activist, founded the Revolutionary Association of the Women of Afghanistan to advocate women's issues and protect.
- Khatol Mohammadzai became the first female general in the Afghan National Army.
- In 2004 summer Olympics in Athens, Robina Mugim Yaar and Friba Razayee became the first two female athletes representing Afghanistan.
- In 2005, Afghanistan National Olympic Committee opened a bodybuilding club for women with Female Boxing Federation.
- Malalai Joya served in the Afghan parliament in the National Assembly from 2005 to 2007.
- Habibi Sorabi was appointed first female provincial governor in 2005 and in 2009, Azra Jafari was elected first female mayor in Afghanistan.



**Chart: Female vs Male Participation in the Public Sector, 2010**



Source: UNIFEM Factsheet 2010

**Achievement in political Arena**—Despite all odds women are coming up very enthusiastically responding to the measures in the reconstruction plans. 2002 witnessed 12 % women participants in the new constitution-Loya Jirga and contributed to the formulation of post-Taliban political system of Afghanistan. The no of female participants in Loya Jirga rose to 20% by 2003 and a significant no. of women voted -40% voters were female]. According to the PIRS [Canadian Government’s Parliamentary Information and Research

service] report, Afghan constitution grants 25% of seats for women in the lower house that is called the *Wolesi Jirga*, and 17% seats have been allocated to women in the upper house, the *Meshrano Jirga*. Owing to these grants, the number of women in parliament rose to 69 in 2011 [Oxfam report]. The government has also guaranteed to improve women’s representation by 30% in the legislature by 2020 and 30% in civil services by next year-2013.

#### **Achievements in social area**

**Education sector-**Education is a sector where Afghanistan has gained success from the development strategy and policy implementations post 2001. The Taliban had banned girls from education and Afghan government made girls' education a priority in its attempts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals. Article 43 of the Constitution gives girls and women right to education. As per 2011 statistics, 38% of Afghan students are females. More than 9000 new schools have been opened and many of them are especially for girls. Since 2002, 36% of teachers hired are females.

**Health sector-** A 2011 survey of five million Afghans from 34 provinces of Afghanistan reveals there has been tremendous improvement in the health sector. Life expectancy at birth has changed in 62 years now and only 10% children die before attaining the age of five. Maternal mortality rates had dropped to 327 in 100,000 births. National Progress Report on Afghanistan reports that 3000 midwives work to facilitate health services, today whereas it was just 400 a decade back. This has improved accessibility to health facilities for women. According to the **Afghan Ministry of**

**Health [MoPH]**, Women's access to health services is a top priority of the government. As per UK Department for International Development (DFID), in 2002 only 10% of Afghan population had access to health. However, now 85% of Afghans have access to a basic health facility.

## Conclusion

The current situation may sound grave when compared to other developing nations, yet seeing the multi-ethnic society, multi-cultural history and traditions that govern the Afghan society, it is unfair to judge gender issues here as in other countries. The needs of Afghan women are to a large extent different in various socioeconomic realities that exist for women in nomadic tribes, rural areas and urban agglomerations. Thus, empowering them by providing access to education, health facilities, justice against physical violence, safe environment and equal job opportunities and creating awareness of their fundamental rights as well as human rights is more important than making global comparisons. The women of Afghanistan recognize their

rights gradually with the efforts of the international community and government actions. Yet traditions, past experiences and future insecurities tend to hold them back and this is why despite of rigorous efforts of modernization and democratization, traditions and religious laws still continue to be the supreme power in Afghan society. Many experts believe a complete withdrawal of NATO forces would bring back the same Talibanized situation, giving chance to insurgents and fundamentalist forces. It is true that the sudden decrease in international aid which is currently in billions of dollars would definitely slow down the efforts of women empowerment, yet with government strategies and external supports would not let all the achievements go waste. However, US Secretary of State clearly stated in her speech that NATO is factoring women and their needs into key planning processes and training courses, stationing gender experts throughout operational headquarters, and deploying female engagement teams to Afghanistan, where the alliance is also training local women to serve in the security forces. In 2012, 10 percent of the Afghan military academy's

class will be women, and by 2014 Afghanistan expects to field 5,000 women Afghan national police officers.<sup>4</sup>

So, the achievements of the Karzai government and global efforts to bring all political groups and religious leaders to a common platform for building post-2014 strategies carry hopes for women too. Recently, in a sudden and shocking move, Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai has authorized a ban on wearing full veils in public places. This revolutionary action makes Afghanistan the first Islamic country to impose restrictions on a form of attire that many Muslims consider a religious obligation. It is a daring act seeing the fear of fundamentalist opposition, but Afghan women consider it another milestone toward their freedom.

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<sup>4</sup> Hillary Rodham Clinton, Secretary of State, Washington, DC, December 19, 2011 available on <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2011/12/179173.htm>

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