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The Women of Afghanistan

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Afghanistan can be a hard and cruel land, especially for women and girls. Many fear they will be even more vulnerable to harsh tribal customs and the men who impose them after American troops withdraw by the end of 2014.

Womens' rights have made modest but encouraging gains over the past decade. But these could disappear without a strong commitment to preserve and advance them from Afghan leaders, Washington and other international partners.

Severe restrictions imposed by the Taliban, on access to education, health care and work, before they were ousted from power after Sept. 11 have been lifted in government-controlled areas. Women have run for office, been named to government posts and become more involved in Afghan society; some operate their own businesses. The 2004 Constitution guaranteed equal rights. In 2009, a new law banned violence against women and set new penalties for underage and forced marriage, rape and other abuses. Many more girls are in school and maternity death rates are down.

Much, of course, remains to be done. More than half of Afghan girls are still not in school, and, of those who are, few will stay long enough to graduate. Intimidation is commonplace; girls have been attacked and even doused with acid to be kept from attending school. It is not uncommon, especially in rural areas, for families to trade daughters into marriage or prostitution to settle debts. Women abused by their husbands or families too often end up in jail instead of their abusers.

A recent study by Human Rights Watch, which interviewed 58 women and girls in prison, found that half were jailed for acts that any reasonable person would not consider a crime, like running away from abusive situations. People who force women into marriage, often at very young ages, or subject them to violence, are rarely prosecuted, the group said. Female victims get little support from police and judges, and they face the added injustice of being punished for committing "moral crimes," like "zina" — sexual intercourse between two people not married to each other. Criminalizing zina is contrary to Afghanistan's international obligations, the group says.

There are rare victories. The Times reported on Saturday that an appeals court held up prison sentences of 10 years each for the in-laws who tortured a 13-year-old girl when she refused to become a prostitute or have sex with the man she was forced to marry.

President Hamid Karzai's record on women's rights is less than encouraging. While he has pardoned women accused of moral crimes, he has failed to vigorously enforce the violence against women law. In March, he signed off on a decree from the country's highest religious council stating that women were secondary to men. With his government and the United States exploring peace talks with the Taliban, many activists worry that women's interests will be sacrificed as part of a strategic deal.

The Obama administration has insisted that this will not happen, most recently at the Tokyo donors' conference in July when Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton promised that "the United States will continue to stand strongly by the women of Afghanistan." She and other Western leaders will have to keep nudging Mr. Karzai in that direction, even as they invest in schools, teachers, shelters and rule-of-law programs. Right now, it appears as if Washington and other donors are chiefly interested in building up Afghanistan's expensive Army and finishing infrastructure projects.

One bright spot is that more Afghan women seem to have found their voice and have not been timid about advocating for their own rights. But all Afghans should be invested in empowering women. As Mrs. Clinton has argued, there is plenty of evidence to show that no country can grow and prosper in today's world if women are marginalized and oppressed.