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A Glance At Challenges Of Afghan Women

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Despite impressive efforts made since 2001, and some significant strides in education, in many ways things remain extremely difficult for women. All major social indicators continue to show a consistent pattern of women's challenges in nearly all dimensions of their lives and Afghanistan remains one of the worst countries in the world to be born as a woman. However, since 2001, 2.5 million girls have returned to school but the political instability intensified issues as if they are suffering unprecedented frustration. Illiteracy among women remains high (87.4 per cent); only 6 per cent of women over the age of 25 have a formal education, resulting in gaps in the labor market. Due to severe restrictions on mobility, only 8 per cent of women are involved in wage employment outside the agricultural sector. Women's mortality rate is higher than men's, even when factoring in male combatants as evidenced in the fact that life expectancy is 48 years for men and 44 years for women. Violence against women and girls remains endemic, with severe consequences for women's education, health, security, mobility, unemployment and political empowerment.

These problems are interconnected and have reciprocal effect on each other – making lasting solutions even more difficult. According to past surveys, lack of education for women is consistently seen as the biggest problem. Only 23.5 percent of the population above 15 years old is literate, while the rate for women is even worse at 12.6 percent. At 36 percent, Afghanistan's enrollment of girls in primary schools is low compared with 90.4 percent in Iran, 67 percent in Saudi Arabia, and 62 percent in Pakistan.

Only 40% of Afghan girls attend elementary school, and only one in 20 girls attend school beyond the sixth grade. There are approximately three times more boys attending school than girls. Many Afghan families will only permit their daughters to attend all-girls schools close to home and few such schools exist. Other families believe it is unnecessary for girls to be educated. Schools for girls have been burned down, hundreds of teachers educating girls have been threatened or killed, and girls have been physically harmed while attending or walking to or from school. Many men were killed in the armed conflicts, and older husbands are likely to die sooner than their child brides.

In spite of above critical conditions, Afghanistan has experienced a few major achievements in the education sector for women, including the adoption of certain written guarantees in the national constitution (Article 44) regarding development of balanced education for women; the enrollment of 2.2 million girls in primary schools (extraordinary in Afghanistan's history); and permission to establish higher education institutes in specialized fields and basic literacy schools (Article 46).

However, many written guarantees have not implemented yet and many obstacles lie ahead, such as local traditions and discriminations against women's education; lack of female schools in villages; lack of proper education infrastructure; lack of personal security; and lack of female teachers, to name a few. There are also socio-tribal beliefs that consider education unnecessary or even hazardous for women, further preventing girls from attending schools. Even in seminaries, the number of female students is very low due to lack of interest in women's education and lack of female religious teachers. Other impediments such as violence against women, underage marriages, forced marriages, economic problems, considering girls as temporary family member and marriage as a solution to family disputes (known as *baad*), also hinder them from education. In addition, lack strong commitment to National laws and modern values along with coming warlord Gulbadin Hakmatyar created new concerns for women community.

Lack of Job Opportunities

From 31 percent up to 35 percent unemployment is cited as the second biggest problem Afghan women face. A separate study indicated that only a quarter of government positions are occupied by women. Although Article 48 of the constitution stipulates that every Afghan has the right to work, the government does not pave the way for women to gain positions in government. Other factors also contribute to unemployment, such as low literacy rates and professional skills among women; disagreement over a woman's right to work outside of the house in most uneducated tribal area. Parents often hold a double standard regarding children's education, with more attention given to the education of boys than to girls as boys are considered to be the permanent member of the family.

Early Marriage

Almost 60% of girls are married by 16 and it is estimated that up to 80 percent of marriages in poor rural areas are either forced or arranged. Most girls marry far older men — some in their

60s — whom they meet for the first time at their wedding. The implications of child marriage cannot be underestimated. Married girls do not continue their education and remain illiterate. They have babies while still young teenagers, increasing health problems and risking death for themselves and their children (the risk of death during pregnancy or childbirth for girls under 14 is five times higher than for adult women).

Lack of Security

Risk of kidnapping, explosions and poisoning can also cause to prevent from education and force them into early marriage. moreover, Ruling talibanized ideology such as insisting women and girls stay at home, and can only leave if they are fully covered and accompanied by a male relative.

Accordingly, the major indicators show that almost 40% of Afghan women are extremely isolated. They are exceptionally in need to draw the attention of international community and the government of Afghanistan. Education can be suggested as one of the best strategies to more empowerment and independence of women in a man dominating country.