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The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

## Violence against Afghan women, including rape, widespread and unpunished, says UN

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KABUL / GENEVA - A new UN report on women in Afghanistan, issued Wednesday, describes the extensive and increasing level of violence directed at women taking part in public life, as well as the “widespread occurrence” of rape against a backdrop of institutional failure and impunity.

The 32-page report, issued jointly by the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), notes that “violence, in the public and private spheres, is an everyday occurrence in the lives of a huge proportion of Afghan women.”

The full text of ‘Silence is Violence: End the abuse of women in Afghanistan’ can be found at:  
[www.unama.unmissions.org/](http://www.unama.unmissions.org/)

“This report paints a detailed and deeply disturbing picture of the situation facing many Afghan women today,” said UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Navi Pillay. “The limited space that opened up for Afghan women following the demise of the Taliban regime in 2001 is under sustained attack, not just by the Taliban themselves, but by deeply engrained cultural practices and customs, and – despite a number of significant advances in terms of the creation of new legislation and institutions -- by a chronic failure at all levels of government to advance the protection of women’s rights in Afghanistan.”

While touching on the full range of violence affected Afghan women – including so-called “honour” killings, the exchange of women and girls as a form of dispute-resolution (often in connection with land or property issues), trafficking and abduction, early and forced marriages and domestic violence – the report focuses on two principal issues: the “growing trend” of violence and threats against women in public life, and rape and sexual violence.

Women participating in virtually all sectors of public life, including “parliamentarians, provincial council members, civil servants, journalists, women working for international organizations... have been targeted by anti-government elements, by local traditional and religious power-holders, by their own families and communities, and in some instances by government authorities,” the report says, citing a number of individual examples of targeted killings of professional women, as well as a litany of discrimination, threats, intimidation and harassment aimed at prominent or working women and their families.

While noting that the new Afghan Constitution includes a 25 percent quota for female members of parliament – one of the highest such quotas in the world – the report also notes that “a number of female MPs have already indicated that due to the prevailing security situation and death threats they repeatedly receive, they will not be contesting the next national assembly elections in 2010.”

It also details numerous attacks on girls’ schools, and on girl pupils – including gas and acid attacks – by “anti-government elements.”

“Developments such as these threaten to have a devastating long-term impact on the involvement of women in Afghan society,” Pillay said. “There have been some encouraging incremental advances in the area of girls’ education in recent years, and it is extremely important to have women participating in the country’s political arena, but the Taliban and other conservative forces seem determined to take the country back to the stone age.”

The segment of the report dealing with sexual violence, paints an extremely bleak picture of a society where rape is both widespread and taboo, and where the victims are more likely to be punished than the perpetrators.

Most information on sexual violence and rape, the report says, is “anecdotal, incomplete and at times unreliable. There is a lack of official primary and comprehensive data on rape.” However, the report’s researchers note that preliminary data “suggests that rape is a widespread occurrence in all parts of Afghanistan and in all communities, and all social groups.”

One of the main problems is a culture of impunity: “Only in a few isolated cases have public institutions taken appropriate action,” the report says. “In many instances, victims seeking help and justice are further victimized... Government action to address rape is woefully inadequate.”

Police and judicial officials are often not aware or convinced that rape is a serious criminal offence, the report says, adding that “Investigating a rape case is rarely a priority.”

It also notes there is no explicit provision in the 1976 Afghan Penal Code criminalising rape, and recommends that this be rectified. A survey of convicted rapists in one Afghan prison indicated that they did not know that rape was a criminal offence, and suggested they might have acted differently had they known they risked imprisonment.

Unaccompanied women and those who have previously been subjected to sexual violence are at

greater risk, as are widows, divorced women, and women whose husbands are out of the country.

“Rapists include individuals who are entrusted as guardians or as care-takers of children and women, such as staff of prisons, juvenile rehabilitation centres, police stations or orphanages,” the report says. “Some detention facilities’ officials are said to have forced female detainees into prostitution or to conduct sexual acts in exchange for food and other items. Others reported that perpetrators are linked to local power-holders, such as Government or elected officials, powerful commanders, members of illegal armed groups and criminal gangs. It is understood that the power and influence of these local power-holders shield perpetrators from prosecution.”

Detailing how cultural norms often exacerbate the problem, the report points out that rape is sometimes used “to ‘dishonour’ another family, tribe or clan, to obtain revenge for a previous crime. Men thus enter into a cycle of revenge, based on the sexual abuse of women.”

Echoing the report’s conclusions, the High Commissioner said “the Government has a duty to eradicate these harmful practices, by making them illegal, educating its population and demonstrating leadership and commitment to safeguard the rights of all Afghan women and girls. The silence surrounding the widely-known problem of violence against the girls and women of Afghanistan must be broken.”

The full text of ‘Silence is Violence: End the abuse of women in Afghanistan’ can be found at: [www.unama.unmissions.org/...](http://www.unama.unmissions.org/...)

Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights For more information or interview requests, call the OHCHR Press Office at + 41 22 917 9767 / 8383 or email: [press-info@ohchr.org](mailto:press-info@ohchr.org).