

# Women's position in Afghanistan since 9/11

**Nahid Afrose Kabir<sup>1</sup>**

**MnM Commentary No 12**

Since 9/11 and the beginning of the US-led occupation of Afghanistan on 7 October 2001, women's position in Afghanistan has improved. Girls are attending schools, and women are participating in politics, entertainment and sports. For example, Fawzia Koofi became a member of the Afghan Parliament in 2005. She was also elected the first woman deputy speaker of the parliament in 2005–2006. Robina Muqimyar Jalali, a female Afghan athlete, is running for parliament and wishes to establish a sports ministry. In 2010, a Canadian-Afghan refugee woman, Mozhdah Jamalzadah, returned to Afghanistan and hosted 'an Oprah-style talk show', which subtly promoted women's rights without being provocative. Women in Kabul are enjoying their freedom to work, they can now sign up to join the police and the armed forces, and girls can attend school. Article 83 of the Afghan constitution states that at least 25 per cent of parliamentary seats should go to female representatives.<sup>2</sup>

One respondent in my study on young American Muslims' identity, Mahinoor (female, aged over 30, national identity: Pakistani-American woman), observed that US involvement in Afghanistan is beneficial to women in Afghanistan. Mahinoor said that she had heard stories from her Afghan relatives about the condition of women under Taliban rule:

---

<sup>1</sup> Nahid Afrose Kabir is a Senior Research Fellow at the International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding at the University of South Australia.

<sup>2</sup> Aryn Baker, 'Afghan women and the return of the Taliban', *TIME*, 9 August 2010, pp 16–22.

I understand there are troops in Afghanistan but do you know what was happening to the women over there? These women were being tortured. My Afghan relative's sister was bombed in the school. And that I think is devastating. My Afghan relative used to tell me stories about how when, he was a teenager, the women used to be raped and everything over there. But now at least that's not what is happening. (interview, Maryland, February 2010)

Mahinoor then referred to a movie that depicted the condition of women in Afghanistan:

Did you see the movie *Osama*? It was about this young little girl, her mother cuts her hair because they didn't have a man to walk with, so they cut her hair. The mother had to work somewhere, so she had to walk with her daughter dressed as a man ...

I personally think, and a lot of Afghans think, that American troops do help. (interview, Maryland, February 2010)

Another interviewee, Nazneen (female, US-born, aged 18, national identity: Afghan), noted that the US-led war efforts were important but cultural factors shouldn't be ignored:

[It is] A good thing by [US] being there but they could do a better job by not bombing weddings, they really need to understand the culture.

It's very important and they need to understand how to treat the women cos if you look at an Afghan lady in the eyes the husband's going to kill you. They are very serious, especially in the villages and rural areas, yeah. (interview, Virginia, January 2010)

When Nazneen mentioned bombing weddings she was perhaps referring to the 1 July 2002 incident when US helicopter gunships and jets fired on an Afghan wedding killing about 40 people and injuring about 70. The attack occurred in the village of Kakarak in Uruzgan

province, in the south of the country, where special forces and other coalition troops were searching for the remaining al-Qaida and Taliban fighters.<sup>3</sup> It appears that the US soldiers were not familiar with Afghan wedding celebrations, which are accompanied by songs, music and fireworks. This may have led to the confusion that ended up with them killing the civilians. Also, Nazneen's note about the need to understand the cultural complexities of women's lives in rural Afghanistan was important.

Though a few respondents in my study appreciated the presence of US troops from a feminist perspective, some women in Afghanistan still remain disadvantaged. In 2009, their illiteracy rate was about 80 per cent, and about 60 per cent of women were still being forced into marriage as children, sometimes as young as 9 or 10 years. In some cases, women set fire to themselves to escape forced marriages or an abusive husband. Since the US-led occupation, forced marriages were supposed to have ended since a law states that girls under 16 should not be married. But police do not always investigate such offences, and male judges have often reduced the sentences of men found guilty of harming women.<sup>4</sup> Although women were promised equality and human rights under a new constitution under the Karzai government in 2004, women still remain vulnerable. A family law was passed in August 2009 that allows husbands in Shi'ite families to starve their wives if they refuse their husbands' sexual demands. There is limited inheritance and custody of children in the case of divorce and women are denied freedom of movement without permission from their families.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, the Taliban's violence against women still exists, especially in rural Afghanistan. In 2010 *TIME* magazine reported that in the Uruzgan province of Afghanistan, an 18-year-old girl named Aisha was punished by the Taliban for running away from her husband and her abusive in-laws. Aisha pleaded that her 'in-laws treated her like a slave ...

---

<sup>3</sup> 'Civilian catastrophe as US bombs Afghan wedding', *The Guardian*, 1 July 2002, <http://www.rawa.org/s-wedding.htm>, accessed 29 January 2012.

<sup>4</sup> 'Life for Afghan women: not better under Karzai', *TressSugar*, 18 August 2009, <http://www.tressugar.com/Life-Afghan-Women-Better-Under-Karzai-4117729>, accessed 29 January 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid; Baker, 'Afghan women and the return of the Taliban', pp 20–21; see also, Jon Boone, 'Afghanistan passes "barbaric" law diminishing women's rights', *The Guardian*, 14 August 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/aug/14/afghanistan-womens-rights-rape/print>, accessed 31 January 2012.

[And] they beat her. If she hadn't run away, she would have died.' Her judge was a local Taliban commander and his verdict was a severe punishment that would be an example for other girls in the village. *TIME* magazine vividly reported:

Aisha's brother-in-law held her down while her husband pulled out a knife. He first sliced off her ears. Then he started on her nose. Aisha passed out from the pain but awoke soon after, choking on her own blood. The men had left her on the mountainside to die.<sup>6</sup>

Aisha managed to get refuge in a secret women's shelter in Kabul.<sup>7</sup> *TIME* magazine further reported that Aisha's family did not protect her from the Taliban.<sup>8</sup> This might have been for fear that the Taliban would persecute her family members, or her family might actually have abandoned her because she brought shame on them. In traditional rural Afghan societies, a girl who runs away is labelled a prostitute. These women are sometimes trafficked into slavery or can become a victim of violence or 'honour' killing.<sup>9</sup>

In southern Afghanistan, where the Taliban has a stronghold, women teachers receive threatening letters delivered at night-time telling them to quit their jobs. They are warned that if they fail to do so both they and their children will be killed. Elsewhere, girls' schools have been burnt down and students have had acid thrown in their faces. In west Afghanistan, in the wake of rising violence in May 2010, the religious council of Herat issued an edict forbidding women to leave home without a male relative in attendance. Other councils in the north of Afghanistan were planning to do the same. It is generally believed that the edicts serve a purpose in protecting the women from the insurgency, but an Afghan woman activist and a Member of Parliament suggested that women can be protected through 'improved governance and security'.<sup>10</sup> However, Herat is traditionally known as an ultra-conservative

---

6 Baker, 'Afghan women and the return of the Taliban', p 16.

7 Ibid, p 16.

8 Ibid, p 20.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid, p 21.

society. In 1996 the Taliban closed more than 3000 girls' schools and dismissed thousands of female teachers in Herat.<sup>11</sup>

In December 2009, President Obama set a deadline that the US would partly pull out from Afghanistan in July 2011. As a result, the Karzai government took steps to reconcile with the Taliban and invited them to run for parliament, but none of them have yet agreed. Afghans are expected to take responsibility for their own security on 31 December 2014. Yet in October 2011 *TIME* reported:

Afghanistan is nowhere close to being able to stand on its own – militarily, economically or even politically. To many it has become an expensive misadventure. Meanwhile the U.S. keeps broadcasting its intention to leave, not so much withdrawing as recoiling from a problem it seemingly no longer has the will or the ability to solve.<sup>12</sup>

On the other hand, some women (including Afghan and non-Afghan respondents in my study) were concerned that, if the Taliban ultra-conservative leaders return, women's rights (both Sunni and Shia) will once again be denied. They have also observed that, even though, under article 3 of the new constitution enacted under the Karzai government, no law may contravene the principles of *Sharia* or Islamic law,<sup>13</sup> nevertheless, as discussed, women remain vulnerable under the Shi'ite family law passed by the Karzai government in 2009.

Human Rights Watch has pleaded with the Karzai government to repeal the law. Critics in Afghanistan observed that the passing of the law was political. The law was backed by hard-line Shia cleric Ayatollah Mohseni, who has influence over the Shia voters of the country.<sup>14</sup> In

---

11 'In brief – women demand UN protection', *The Observer*, 8 September 1996, p 20.

12 Aryn Baker, 'The unwinnable war', *TIME*, 24 October 2011, p 28.

13 Baker, 'Afghan women and the return of the Taliban', p 20.

14 In 2009, the Shi'ite population in Afghanistan was 3 to 4 million, which was about 10 to 15 per cent of the total Afghanistan population. See Pew Research Center, *Mapping the global Muslim population, 2009*, [http://www.pewforum.org/Muslim/Mapping-the-Global-Muslim-Population\(6\).aspx](http://www.pewforum.org/Muslim/Mapping-the-Global-Muslim-Population(6).aspx), accessed 31 January 2012.

the midst of the Shia–Sunni political games, in this context, Shi’ite women remain marginalised.