

Women, Peace and Security in Afghanistan

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Received: December 06, 2018

Accepted: January 23, 2019

ABSTRACT: *In recent years, much attention has been devoted by international organizations, non-governmental organizations, academics and certain governments to the security, peace and rights of women around the world so as in Afghanistan. This resulted in the production of a number of studies on this theme, by the Division for the Advancement of Women and UNIFEM. Such studies have done much to raise awareness of the way women are affected in war zone like Afghanistan and how States and organizations have responded to their plight. Recommendations as to how to ensure the most appropriate responses to the needs of women have also ensued. However, for such work to be truly effective, it needs to be adapted for those who operate in situations of war zones. The aim of this paper is to provide a working tool to ensure the provision of appropriate programmes and services to, and with, women affected war zones.*

Key Words: *Women, Peace and Security*

Introduction

In the current socio-political and economic milieu, no country can achieve sustainable development and prosperity without bringing its women in the main stream and giving them equal opportunity (Hudson & Leidi, 2015). This is in particularly true for Afghanistan, where women's emancipation and empowerment is recognized as a key factor to growth and development. Life for women in Afghanistan has usually been difficult throughout its history. Afghan women have suffered a lot from depression, violation of human rights, wrong national policies and lack of international support.

Women equality is not just a humanitarian issue, or a moral issue or a fairness issue, but it is a security issue and peace issue. It is now globally acknowledge that to put an end to poverty and ensure that all shares wealth, we have to have the full and equal participation of women and men, girls and boys, around the world (Clinton, 2010). Thus, gender equality and empowerment of women becomes a pivotal instrument in achieving national development goals. Toward this end, the future of Afghanistan as a progressive and economically developed country hinges upon economically and socially empowered women who make almost 50 percent of population. Women can prove to be an asset if they are streamlined, educated and provided opportunities in every sphere of life. In this brief paper, the historical background and perspective of Afghan women are discussed and analyzed.

The First Era of Change in Women's Status in Afghanistan (1919-1980)

The first era of change in Afghan women status had been initiated during the time of King Amanullah Khan after obtaining sovereignty in 1919. From 1919 onward, women issues are an integral part of nation-building agendas. Afghan women were first eligible citizens to cast vote in 1919 where a year later women in United Kingdom were giving voting rights and a year before the women in the United States were given the right to vote (Zuberi, 2013).

During his short-lived reign, King Amanullah Khan adopted more liberal and women friendly policies. He made education compulsory for all Afghans and established the first girls' school in 1920 in the history of Afghanistan. During that period, women just like their male counterparts appeared in public sphere even if their faces were not covered fully. He also gave women the right to discard the practice of establishing marital status before solemnizing Nikah (Zuberi, 2013).

The reformistic policies of King Amanullah continued by most of his successors until the last decade of twentieth century and the rulers who came later on have also emphasized on women empowerment and women emancipation. The constitution that was adopted in 1964, legally guaranteed most of the rights and privileges for Afghan women. Among others, women were given the rights to accept or reject marriage proposal and also to reject the culture of marrying her husband's family members in case of death of her husband (Kohdamany, 2015).

However, in early 1980s, the former Soviet Union forces invaded Afghanistan and the country slipped into chaos and turbulence. The progresses that had been made in the last so many decades were wiped out and the power struggle between various ethnic groups resulted in the segmentation of Afghan society, and thus paved the way for Taliban emergence.

The Status of Afghan Women during Taliban's Regime

Due to decades of war in the country, however, the Afghan women status has been in decline in almost every area (Clinton, 2015). After the collapse of the Soviet Union backed regime of President Najibullah in 1992, the Mujahedeen started ruling in the country. During that period, women's security dramatically deteriorated. Due to insecurity in the country, the Taliban regime emerged and took over the country. During that time women were the most oppressed and depressed segment of the society. Women lost their freedom of security and were treated inadequately.

Amid the chaos and civil war in the country, the Taliban took over the control of Kabul in 1996 and stayed in power till late 2001. These were years of brutalities, suffering and violence against women. During this era, women in Afghanistan were suffering from severe disempowerment because of social injustice; socioeconomic dependence on men, illiteracy, poverty, stoned to death etc. (Salbi, 2015). Education was prohibited for women, they were prevented from taking up any sort of job and it was made mandatory for women to put hijab on their faces. For instance, dressed in a complete head-to-toe garment, with a mesh-covered opening for their eyes before they could appear in public or step out of their homes (Kohdamany, 2015).

The Taliban enforced a large number of restrictions and complete ban on almost all the outdoor activities of women. For instance, women working outside their home were banned unless they were accompanied by a male relative escort. Likewise, they were also banned from dealing with male counterparts, studying at schools, universities, using cosmetics, laughing loudly at public, wearing high heel shoes, traveling in the same bus with male, appearing in TV or Radio, riding bicycles or driving cars, wearing sexually attractive cloths etc. (Das, 2006).

In addition, Taliban ordered every household in Afghanistan to put black paint on their window glasses so that their women could not be seen outside by public, which in their opinion was a sin. It was beyond imaginations to take a lady on her deathbed to a hospital if the doctor happened to be a male. They would let the women die but would think it would be a sin, if the women were examined by the opposite gender (Das, 2006). Political participation and public speaking of women was stymied. Not a single day would be passed without any women being subjugated to worst kind of brutalities. The Taliban considered women as an inferior creature. They treated women as worthless commodities. These were all years of sufferings and brutalities for women till 2001 (Kohdamany, 2015). This era will be marked as the darkest period in the history of Afghan nation in general and for Afghan women in particular. As a result, Afghanistan has had one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world, and Afghan women often faced gender-based violence such as domestic violence, forced marriage etc (Das, 2006).

Third Era of Change New Hopes and New Aspirations

The third era has witnessed relaxation and improvement in the social, political and economic status of Afghan girls and has in 2001 as a result of U.S.-led military invasion and downfall of the Taliban. Through the Bonn process, the new interim government of Afghanistan, headed by Mr. Hamid Karzai was set up in December 2001 (Nicoletta, 2014). Since then, the international community and the newly established government of Afghanistan have focused on Afghan women on a priority basis. Women from all walks of life can now openly appear in public without being accompanied by any male family members, which was impossible during the Taliban rule. Afghan women got the right to participate in the election and voting process and could elect leaders of their choice. Various gender restrictions on access to work, health care, and education have been lifted (Hudson & Leidi, 2015). Over three million girls enrolled in school for the first time, and women returned to the public sphere, with many entering the workforce. Women have been employed and participated in significant numbers in the public and private sectors such as universities, businesses, airlines, hospitals, cinema, police force, socio-political sector etc. (Kohdamany, 2015).

The newly established government of Afghanistan is accountable to all citizens and is committed to its constitutional and international obligations, including gender equality, are crucial to overcoming the systemic gender discrimination that thrived under the Taliban's rule. The Afghan National Action Plan (ANAP) on women covers almost all issues that women face in the post 9/11 scenarios. The main theme of the ANAP is to ensure maximum representation and participation of women along side with their male counterparts in each and every sector of the society (ANAP, 2015).

At present, the Afghan government is striving to ensure that women get a say in the decision-making process and be given the representation in the bureaucratic set up. The current government also wants to make sure that women from all the country participate actively in the provincial and national assembly election through their vote and as candidates from various constituencies (Roby, 2014). As a result, there is 28 percent of women participation in the Afghan Parliament, 3 cabinet members, 42 percent

of university students are women, over 3 millions girls are enrolled at schools, and over 100 organizations have been established for women (Kohdamany, 2015).

These advancements do not mean that all the issues and problems of women have been resolved. There are still a number of significant challenges for women and girls such as security, legal rights, reaching rural areas, capacity building, custody, divorce, domestic violence, exchange of girls as a payment for dispute settlement etc. The women in the conflict zones of Afghanistan still suffer from lack of economic empowerment and underrepresentation in each and every sector of the society (Hudson & Leidi, 2015). Among so many other reasons, one of the main reasons for not empowering women and giving them proportionate representation is the lack of political will on the part of government. On this, the United Nations through a resolution recognized the fact that war and conflict dents in and every segment of the society in general but women in particular are the worst victims. They are the main players who suffer due to conflict or war that arises in any part of the world (UN Resolution, 2000).

Conclusion

Women in South Asia in general and in Afghanistan in particular are deprived of many economic and social opportunities. Empowering women economically would enhance the standard of living of their families, reduce population growth rate and bring about social stability (Clinton, 2015). Although Afghanistan has produced legendary female characters in the fields as diverse as politics, academics, literature and journalism, however, they suffered a great deal during the Mujahedeen and specially Taliban era, which started in 1996 and ended in 2001. With the change of regime in the post Taliban years, things have started to improve for all people in general and for women in particular.

Capitalizing on the achieved result in the post-Taliban era and further improving the status of Afghan women and girls is crucially important for the nation's political development and stabilization. Investing in girls' education and women's economic opportunities has a multiplier effect; it enhances development outcomes, including the health and education of children and the economic status of families and communities (SUR, 2015). Strengthening the status of women also correlates with reduced rates of conflict and violence. Promoting gender equality is, therefore, not only a significant human rights issue, but also an economic and security matter. In the post Taliban era, national the government supported by the US and international community have undertaken the task of re-empowering the women and achieved tangible results. However, Afghan women, in general, are still largely remaining in lower socio-economic conditions (Clinton, 2016).

Backsliding on gender equality in Afghanistan would undermine the security, stability, and development of a country in which both the U.S. and Afghan governments have made significant investments. Americans and Afghans have sacrificed their lives in the fight to rid Afghanistan of the threats posed by terrorism and extremism (Hudson & Leidi, 2015).

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