



Women and Girls in Afghanistan

For nearly three decades, the people of Afghanistan have been subjected to a succession of brutal wars, from the Soviet occupation (1979–1989) to a period of tribal civil wars (1990–1996) and the oppressive rule of the Taliban (1996–2001). These conflicts have left Afghanistan’s infrastructure and economy devastated, making it one of the poorest countries in the world.

Prior to the Soviet occupation and Taliban takeover, Afghanistan was a relatively liberal country with a progressive outlook on women’s rights. Afghan women made up 50% of government workers, 70% of schoolteachers, and 40% of doctors in Kabul. However, the effects of war and the Taliban regime quickly effaced the rights of women in public life and relegated them to solely the domestic domain.

Women and girls have often been the worst victims of conflict. Under the Taliban, women were forced to wear an all-encompassing burqa in public and barred from working outside the home. They were also banned from attending schools, riding bicycles, wearing brightly colored clothes, or laughing loudly. As many as 1 million women have been widowed by Afghanistan’s wars and left with few options for supporting themselves and their families.

Women and Girls in Afghanistan: Basic Data

US figures are provided for comparative context.

Metric	Afghanistan Rate	Afghanistan International Ranking	US Rate	US International Ranking
Infant Mortality Rate	152/1,000 (600 children under 5 years of age die every day)	3 of 226 countries	6.3/1,000	185 of 226 countries
Maternal Mortality Rate	1,900/100,000 (50 women die every day from complications in pregnancy and childbirth)	2 of 166	8/100,000	121 of 136
Fertility Rate	7.9 births per woman	4 of 194	2.05 births per woman	117 of 194
Females Receiving Prenatal Care	16%	26 of 62	99%	1 of 62
Births Attended by Skilled Health Staff	14%	47 of 76	99%	8 of 76
Female Life Expectancy at Birth	44 years	211 of 226	81 years	45 of 226
Girls of Primary School Age Not in School	86% (up to 30% of school-age children support their families)	3 of 99	0%	96 of 99
Female Completion Rate — Primary School	18%	118 of 145	N/A	
Male Completion Rate — Primary School	46%	111 of 145	N/A	
Literacy — Male	43%	191 of 194	99%	32 of 194
Literacy — Female	13%	195 of 195	99%	19 of 195

Sources: CIA World Factbook; UNICEF; Embassy of Afghanistan, Washington DC; Beyond Belief Screening and Action Guide; NationMaster.com; Wikipedia.



Since the US-led invasion, however, Afghanistan has experienced some dramatic changes. A new constitution was approved in 2004 and the country's first presidential elections were held later that year, bringing Hamid Karzai to power. The constitution made women and men equal citizens under the law and mandates that women comprise at least 25% of the new parliament. Billions of dollars in foreign aid have poured into the country, both through government-sponsored assistance programs and international NGOs (non-governmental organizations).

Despite these relative improvements, the country today stands at a tipping point. For most women, little has changed since the days of the Taliban. It remains taboo for an Afghan woman to be seen in public without a burqa, although it is not required by law. Women and girls are still largely

uneducated and confined to their homes, with few prospects for gainful employment. Girls are often the most marginalized and vulnerable. The literacy rate for females over the age of 15 is 13% compared to 43% for males. Only 40% of females attend primary school and 6% attend secondary school. Currently, there are 13 universities in Afghanistan educating 40,000 students — 19% women, 81% men.

Islamic fundamentalism continues to influence the Afghan government's policies on women's rights. Violence against women and girls in the form of physical, psychological, and sexual abuse remains prevalent. Afghan women and girls are often forced into marriages with older men, resulting in alarming suicide rates. In 2007, 500 women set fire to themselves to escape forced marriages. Analysis of the situation has indicated that the nation's

women are among the worst off in the world, both in comparison to Afghan men and to women in other countries around the world.

Investing in girls' education is critical to addressing girls' needs and concerns as well as human rights. It has been shown that girls who go to school and stay in school are more likely to find jobs as adults, get married older, have fewer children, and are able to earn more for their families and communities. Beyond protective security measures, the only way to ensure women's human rights in Afghanistan and to truly empower women in the long run is through offering primary, secondary, and higher education that will foster literacy, free-thinking, and knowledge of international human rights standards.

