



# The Taliban, Women, and Human Rights

Fall 2012

The Taliban took control of Afghanistan's government in 1996 and ruled until it was driven from power during the 2001 US-led invasion. The Taliban provided safe haven to al-Qaeda, an Islamic extremist organization that publicly executed criminals and outlawed education for women and girls.<sup>1</sup>

Today, although progress has been made, and education is more accessible than under the Taliban, more than half of all Afghan girls still do not attend school. Underneath the surface of reported progress, problems persist, and official positions often conflict. According to Human Rights Watch, in March 2012, Afghanistan President Hamid Karzai publicly supported a statement by Afghanistan's Ulema Shura, a government-sponsored council of religious leaders, that said women are secondary to men, should not travel without a male chaperone, and should not mix with men in public or while working or studying. Karzai later explained his position by saying, "The clerics' council of Afghanistan did not put any limitations on women. It is the sharia law of all Muslims and all Afghans."<sup>2</sup>

Afghan women, especially those living in rural areas, still must live according to these strict rules of conduct. They have some of the worst literacy, poverty, and life expectancy rates in the world; many women and girls live in physically abusive environments and are forced into marriage—often at a young age and to a much older man. Women who travel outside their home or between villages and cities must be escorted by a male relative or husband at the risk of being labeled "immoral."

Several hundred children in Afghanistan live in prisons and juvenile detention facilities. While accurate statistics are not publicly available, Human Rights Watch estimates there are approximately 400 women and girls imprisoned in Afghanistan for "moral crimes." This is about half of all of the non-juvenile women in Afghanistan's prisons and virtually all teenage girls in its juvenile detention facilities.<sup>3</sup>

Eleven years after the fall of the Taliban, there have been significant improvements for Afghan women and girls. Official restrictions for access to education, work, and health care have ended, and millions of girls are attending school for the first time. Women hold government positions, win election to public office, and have become police officers and soldiers. A 2004 constitution guarantees women equal rights, and a 2009 law makes violence against women a crime.

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## Notes

1. Jayshree Bajoria, "The Taliban in Afghanistan Background," Council on Foreign Relations, last updated October 26, 2011, accessed June 26, 2012, <http://tiny.cc/ijlahw>.
2. "I Had to Run Away Report," Human Rights Watch, published March 29, 2012, <http://tiny.cc/5glahw>.
3. *World Report: Afghanistan*, Human Rights Watch, <http://tiny.cc/ijlahw>.

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## Selected Resources

Human Rights Watch is an independent organization dedicated to defending and protecting human rights around the world. Every year, they issue reports on the status of human rights in countries around the world, including Afghanistan. The organization works to prevent discrimination, uphold political freedom, protect people from inhumane conduct in wartime, and bring offenders to justice, <http://www.hrw.org/>.

Afghanistan: Moral Crimes, Human Rights Watch, published March 26, 2012, <http://tiny.cc/eflahw>.

Heather Barr, "Are Afghan Women Better Off After a Decade of War?" Human Rights Watch, published March 8, 2012, <http://www.hrw.org/news/2012/03/08/are-afghanwomen-better-after-decade-war>.

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## Credit

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