Publication Announcement

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“Like a bird with broken wings”

UN Women releases a research report on violence against women during 30 years of conflict.

Kabul, 5 December, 2013 — Afghanistan has been in conflict for over thirty years, during which Afghans have experienced and witnessed unspeakable violence and upheaval. Enforced disappearance, summary execution, torture, rape, indiscriminate bombardment and wanton destruction have been a daily reality for the people of Afghanistan for decades.

The UN Women Afghanistan Country Office will release a report on 7 December 2013 documenting the accounts of women and girls who have experienced and witnessed widespread violence during the conflict from 1978 to 2008 at the hands of different perpetrators.

Rape and other forms of sexual violence have been used as a weapon of war and been a consequence of conflict throughout history, globally. This report contains testimonies from rape victims and their immediate family members. Women and girls were abducted by armed groups and forced into marriage with commanders, raped or detained for longer periods in conditions that would be described as sexual slavery.

The fall of the Taliban in late 2001 heralded an unprecedented opportunity to address a dark chapter in Afghanistan’s history, including the widespread violations of international humanitarian law and international human rights law. The failure of the Government of Afghanistan and the international community to seize that opportunity allowed many individuals with ‘blood-stained hands’ back into positions of power.

UN Women based its 80-page report titled Afghan Women Oral History on 730 testimonies from women and girls. Information was gathered in 2008 from 34 districts in seven provinces of Kabul, Balkh, Jowzjan, Herat, Daikundi, Bamyan and Kandahar. This report documented Afghan women’s experiences of violence over thirty years of conflict through an “oral history”-styled format. Oral history involves the collection of memories and personal histories of historical significance through recorded interviews. The report is arranged thematically by a specific experience that was commonly encountered across the testimonies in different provinces. It does not nor is it intended to offer a comprehensive, chronological account of the conflict in Afghanistan. Nor does it provide an assessment of who bears greatest responsibility for the commission of violations throughout.

Incidents of violence against women still remained largely under-reported due to cultural restraints, social norms and taboos, customary practices and religious beliefs, discrimination against women that leads to...
wider acceptance of violence against them, fear of social stigma and exclusion, and, at times threat to life. Prevailing insecurity and weak rule of law have further hampered women’s access to formal justice institutions. Those incidents that reach law enforcement and judicial authorities or receive public attention due to their egregious nature represent the tip of the iceberg of incidents of violence against women throughout the country.

However, in the four years since the above testimonies were recorded, there have been some steps forward to end violence against Afghan women and girls, most notably the enactment of the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) Law. Enacted in August 2009, the EVAW Law criminalises child marriage, forced marriage, selling and buying of women and girls for the purpose or under the pretext of marriage, ba’ad (giving away a woman or girl to settle a dispute), forced self-immolation and 17 other acts of violence against women including rape and beating. It also specifies punishment for perpetrators.

UN Women urges the Government of Afghanistan to act immediately to end the culture of impunity in Afghanistan and ensure that those responsible for crimes of violence and human rights violations against women and girls are held accountable for their actions. The testimonies included in this report tell an unequivocal tale of suffering and make it clear that violence against women and girls in Afghanistan has gone unpunished for too long. If fears of increased instability following the international troop withdrawal are realized, there is a very real possibility that cases such as those documented in this report will increase. This must not be allowed to happen.

To provide access to justice for all and particularly women who experienced violence during all phases of the conflict, UN Women makes 26 recommendations to the Government, international community and the Civil Society, urging them to ensure that promotion and protection of women’s rights are an integral part of peace and reconciliation efforts and the country’s political, economic and security strategies.

Among other recommendations, the report specifically calls upon the Government of Afghanistan to acknowledge the commission of wartime atrocities, develop protection programs and support services for victims and witnesses of attacks against women, and foster an institutional culture in which women’s participation in the justice system, whether professionally or personally, is promoted and encouraged.

The report also calls on international donors to make government aid conditional upon demonstrated respect for human rights and to support Government and Civil Society initiatives that promote an end to violence against women and to cultural practices that have a detrimental effect upon women and girls such as child/forced marriage. The report also urges them to continue to document, raise awareness and speak out about past and present human rights violations, including gender-based violence.

The recommendations to the Civil Society include public awareness on EVAW, create spaces for women to talk openly about past experiences of violence, and continue to lobby for a more transparent, inclusive and accountable peace process in which victims of conflict-related violence can actively and genuinely participate. The report “Like a bird with broken wings” is available for download at: http://asiapacific.unwomen.org/countries/Afghanistan.

UN Women is the UN organization dedicated to gender equality and the empowerment of women. A global champion for women and girls, UN Women was established to accelerate progress on meeting their needs worldwide. For more information, visit http://asiapacific.unwomen.org/countries/Afghanistan. UN Women, UNOCA Compound, Jalalabad Road, Kabul, Afghanistan Tel: +93 702 55 80 91, Email: info.afghanistan@unwomen.org