

## **Afghan Women Face Growing Threats**

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Series of abductions and assassinations highlight dangers ahead of 2014 NATO pullout.

Analysts say a spate of attacks on high-profile Afghan women has heightened fears that the limited gains for women's rights will be reversed after NATO forces withdraw next year.

Fariba Ahmadi Kakar, who represents the southern province of Kandahar in the Afghan parliament, was freed by Taleban kidnappers on September 8 in exchange for a number of insurgent prisoners and their relatives.

Kakar was kidnapped on August 15 along with her three sons and her driver as they were driving along the Kabul-Kandahar highway near the city of Ghazni. It was the first time a female member of parliament had been abducted by insurgents.

The Taleban were unrepentant about their actions. Spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid, who said that six men and four women were freed in exchange for Kakar, admitted that kidnapping women was a violation of Afghan custom, but he claimed the insurgents had been left with little choice, and would do so again if they had to.

"We accept that this act... was contrary to Afghan tradition and culture, but we had to do it as the only option," he said. "We had tried hard to get the prisoners released, but achieved no results. These prisoners were innocent. Some of them had spent ten years in jail."

Other recent attacks on high-profile women include the July 4 assassination of Islam Bibi, the most senior policewoman in the southern Helmand province, shot dead on her way to work in the provincial centre Lashkar Gah.

On August 7, armed men ambushed Rogul Khairzad, a member of the upper house of the Afghan parliament, in the Muqur district in Ghazni province, killing her eight-year-old daughter and her driver.

Observers say that although the Taleban claim to have moderated their position on women's freedoms, and now say they support their right to study and work within the restrictions imposed by Islamic precepts, Kakar's kidnapping shows that there has been no real change in attitudes.

Others say the abduction was just another case of government impotence in the face of insurgent activity.

Belqis Roshan, a senator from Farah province, believes the Afghan security forces should have tracked down the kidnappers and got Kakar released.

"A government with strong security forces will never pay ransoms, as that would show up the weakness of the government and its forces," she said. "With this exchange, the Taleban have now realised that they can extract more benefit from the government by holding women, and they may continue this game in a more dangerous form."

Women's rights have improved since the collapse of the Taleban regime in 2001, with increased access to education and employment. Despite this, serious issues remain. A report released by the Afghanistan Independent Human Rights Commission (AIHRC) in August detailed more than 2,500 recorded attacks on women, including rape, between March and July, with the real figure likely to be much higher.

"Some semi-freedoms and achievements, supported by the international community, have reached a limited number of women," said Soraya Parlika, head of the country-wide Women's Union of Afghanistan. "These achievements are so small as to be insignificant. And we are sure that when the international community exits, these achievements will be wiped out."

A recent report by the charity Oxfam warned that there were too few policewomen – only one per cent of the country's 157,000 police officers are female – to adequately combat crimes such as "honour killings" and domestic violence.

In addition, the report said, female police officers faced routine abuse from both their colleagues and their communities.

"Afghan policewomen are risking their lives to serve their communities. They are harassed and killed because of stigma and ignorance," said Elizabeth Cameron, Oxfam's policy and advocacy advisor in Afghanistan.

These claims were rejected by the interior ministry, which said it was investing heavily in the recruitment of more women.

However, activists say that perpetrators go unpunished, and this creates an atmosphere of impunity that fosters violence against women.

AIHRC member Hawa Alam Nuristani says the government has signally failed to punish rights violators. Things are worse now than under Taleban rule, she claims, because at least during that period, women's physical safety was guaranteed.

"During the reign of the Taleban, nobody could dare attack women even when they left their houses at midnight, while today, women are not safe inside the city of Kabul, despite the presence of tens of thousands of security forces," she said. "They are kidnapped, killed and tortured, and the perpetrators walk free."

Zakia, a 50-year-old Kabul resident, said the situation now was like the 1992-96 civil war, when women were abused with impunity.

"I have a 13-year-old daughter. I worry each day until she returns home from school," she said. "Every moment, I think someone might kidnap her. What kind of meaning does this freedom have for women?"

Parlika said that while she condemned the Taleban's treatment of women, it was important to remember that prominent figures, some part of the current government, were just as culpable.

"Within the corpus of government and parliament, there are people who have either committed violence against women themselves, or who support others who carry out acts of violence against women," Parlika said

She noted that Afghanistan's parliament had failed to ratify a law on the elimination of violence against women earlier this year. The legislation, which formally classes numerous actions as offences against women and sets out penalties, was passed by presidential decree in 2009, but activists had hoped it would gain greater legitimacy if it were ratified by parliament.

The bill was rejected in May after a debate lasting only 15 minutes, during which conservative parliamentarians claimed that it contradicted Islamic sharia law.

Despite outrage from civil society, human rights groups and the international community, the attempt to ratify the law has been shelved indefinitely.

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**Location:** [Afghanistan](#)

**Topic:** [Women's rights](#)

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