

## **Afghanistan: Stealing Chickens From Widows**

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Warnings that small-scale development projects are falling victim to corruption.

Locals in the southern province of Khost have complained that powerful men are exploiting their connections to routinely siphon off aid intended for needy women.

Many NGOs in Afghanistan focus on small-scale farming, sewing or food production schemes intended to help women who often are their families' sole breadwinners.

But corruption and a lack of oversight has meant that items to set women up in their own businesses are easily diverted.

Sera Gul Raqiba is an elderly woman from the village of Dannai in Khost's Zazai Maidan district. Her two sons, both soldiers with the Afghan National Army, were killed in action and she now lives in poverty.

She said she had seen for herself how those in positions of power stole aid.

"One tribal leader had accepted 30 goats from an organisation to help women without any other source of support, but instead of dividing them among poor women and widows he gave them all to his relatives and the wives of powerful local men," she told IWPR.

"After that, the tribal leader took on a chicken farming project. He presented his daughters and wives as widows and distributed all the chickens among his entire family. He trampled on the rights of poor and needy women."

"Many helpless women have come to me to complain about fraud in the distribution of aid," agreed Nadia Bawari, head of the local women's union. "They told me that relief materials are handed out in their villages and towns to women who don't have economic problems, but no-one pays attention to poor and needy women."

Bawari said that more oversight was badly needed.

"Government agencies and officials from international organisations should prevent these actions and ensure that those who deserve it get their rights," she added.

Khost provincial council member Zahra Jalal said that corruption was rampant in the distribution of relief.

"I can say clearly that there is corruption involved in nearly half of all distribution of aid," she continued. "I think the provincial government, the council, the department of women's affairs and other related agencies should form a relief distribution commission to prevent further fraud."

Malalai Wali, head of the department of women's affairs in Khost, urged all institutions, from Afghan charities to international aid agencies, to respect current legislation.

"According to rules and regulations, all bodies offering ways to improve women's lives should work in coordination with our management," she said.

"Unfortunately many NGOs and foreign organisations provide aid to needy women recklessly without informing us about it. So many women are denied the support they deserve."

Sometimes the goods are given as gifts by relatives or friends.

Khost resident Rahimi said that her own family had been given equipment for manufacturing pickles worth 250 US dollars. This was intended to help support impoverished women starting small business, she continued.

"The machine is still sitting in one of our fields, given to us by a relative who worked for a charity," she explained. "Our economic situation is good and we don't need such machines, but my relative insisted we have it. Now the equipment is in the field and could be damaged and broken due to the sun and the rain. We don't use that machine."

Others blame more endemic graft. Khost resident Rabia is the sole breadwinner for her family of eight.

"Some months ago a car stopped in our village and five women dressed in city clothes got out. After asking around, I realised that these women were supposed to register needy women so as to help them.

However, instead of knocking on the doors of impoverished women, the five women went directly to the house of a man who, along with his daughters, already has a monthly income of thousands of afghanis from foreign organisations.”

However, allegations of corruption were refuted by aid agencies working in Khost.

Muhammad Bashir Nekyaar is the managing director of the TLO Organisation, an Afghan NGO.

“Our organisation has helped 483 needy families in three districts of Khost,” he said. “We have given people cows, set up chicken farms, carried out cattle vaccination programmes. We have also built chicken coops and trained many people.”

Nekyaar said that they operated with full transparency.

“We implement all projects under the scrutiny of village councils, district councils and senior officials in the agriculture department. Whatever they approve and sign, we just implement that.”

Hayat Wazir is the director of CARD-F, another Afghan NGO working to improve economic opportunities in rural areas.

They are currently setting up poultry farm, each with about 30 egg-producing chickens, for women with no other means of support.

Wazir also said that their activities were closely coordinated with the provincial government.

“We carry out surveys in each region to find the women who most need assistance. Then we help those women, with full scrutiny from government institutions or local councils. I want to assure women in need that we would never trample on their rights.”

Social affairs’ expert Attaullah Seerak said that the poor security situation in Khost had exacerbated the situation.

“Most of the relief materials, especially for women, are distributed by tribal leaders in more remote areas because the organisations’ workers cannot go to those places due to insecurity. That means the charities depend a great deal on tribal leaders to distribute aid - and these elders do it selectively.”

Local officials agree that there has been some corruption in the distribution of aid materials.

“The provincial government has also received some reports to suggest that personal relationships are preferred over need during the distribution of aid,” said spokesman Mubariz Mohammad Zadran.

“We take these complaints seriously and our team will endeavor to monitor and supervise the programmes in question so that people in need will not be deprived of their rights.”

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