

TRANSFORMING WOMEN'S LIVES

AFGHANISTAN COUNTRY FACTSHEET

BISHOP'S LENT APPEAL 2014

Afghanistan is an ancient focal point of the Silk Road, bringing trade and a melting pot of different people and ideas. However, poverty and conflict mean that Afghanistan is now more famous for its problems than for its culture or spectacular mountain scenery. Today, it is the poorest country in the world outside of Africa and has one of the worst gender inequality rates in the world

Facts and statistics

- More than one in three people live below the poverty line (36 per cent of the population)¹.
- Afghanistan is the poorest country outside Africa, coming in at 172 out of 187 countries².
- Several droughts and floods in recent years have resulted in food insecurity – a third of the population do not have sufficient access to food.
- Average life expectancy is 48 years old³.
- Less than 50 per cent of the population has access to a verified source of clean drinking water⁴.
- There is on average only one doctor per 5,000 people⁵. Doctors are more concentrated in the cities, so in practice this means that in isolated rural areas there may be only one doctor serving a population of 5,000 to 10,000 or even more. People in rural areas can live a day's journey or more from their nearest clinic.
- Afghanistan has both the worst maternal mortality and the worst infant mortality rate in the world⁶. Many families do not, or cannot, take pregnant women to see a doctor unless there are complications, but by then it is often too late to save the mother or her baby. The high prevalence of child marriage also contributes to the problem.
- Nearly one in eight babies die before their first birthday. One in three children under five are underweight⁷.
- Literacy stands at 28.1 per cent. Female literacy is only 12.6 per cent.
- Under the Taliban rule in 2001, less than one million children attended school and none were girls. Now over five million attend school, and nearly a third are girls⁸.
- Statistics suggest that more than 87 per cent of all women suffer from domestic abuse⁹.





Christian Aid/Sarah Millan

Promoting the rights of women and girls is one of Christian Aid's priorities in Afghanistan

Women in Afghanistan

While some progress has been made, gender discrimination in Afghanistan remains widespread in all areas of life, including health, education, access to and control over resources, economic opportunities, and power and political voice. While women and girls bear the direct cost of these inequalities, the negative effects are felt throughout Afghan society.

Before 2001

Before 2001, the Taliban, an extremist Islamic movement, controlled Afghanistan.

The Taliban did not prioritise the development of the country, and many of their policies – such as banning half the population (women) from education and the workforce – increased poverty. Their rule was also characterised by corruption and lack of transparency. This, combined with the conflict, destroyed many people's way of life and led to Afghanistan becoming the poorest country in the world outside Africa.

Under Taliban rule, women were denied education, employment, and political participation and representation. They were banned from leaving the house unless chaperoned by a male relative. Isolated and vulnerable, violence against women was widespread. Those who did try and speak out against their ill-treatment, or who breached prohibitions or offended moral sensibilities, were at risk of imprisonment or worse.

After 2001

After the Taliban were deposed by the US-led invasion of 2001, a new Afghan constitution guaranteeing the equal rights of women and men was adopted by the newly elected government, and the restrictions previously placed upon women and girls lifted – at least under the law.

In the Taliban era, less than one million children were enrolled in school – and almost none of them were girls. Today, over five million children attend school, and more than a third are girls. Afghanistan has approximately seven million school-age children (almost one in five of the population is school-age).

Gradually, more women have started to seek work and they now make up a quarter of Afghanistan's teachers. Many women voted in local and national elections and a few even stood for political office, albeit at great personal risk.

Despite legal protection of their rights, and some incremental changes, centuries-old and deep-rooted perceptions of the role and worth of women take more than a few years to change – especially in a country as huge as Afghanistan, where many communities are isolated and their links to the state are weak. In many areas, the new constitution is no more than a piece of paper lying on a desk in a faraway city, and little has changed in most women's daily lives.

More generally, since 2001, foreign investment and aid money has poured into the country, and some real progress has been made. The economy is estimated to have grown by 22 per cent last year (2011) on the back of good harvests¹⁰ and more people are slowly starting to make a reliable living.

However, corruption, criminality and continuing conflict and insecurity, as well extreme weather events such as droughts and floods, have posed massive challenges to Afghan development. Despite the progress of the past few years, Afghanistan remains extremely poor. More than half the population lacks access to a verified source of clean water, unemployment remains extremely high and a third of all children under five are underweight¹¹.



Christian Aid/Tabitha Ross

In addition to food security work and peace-building, Christian Aid's partners in Afghanistan train local communities in literacy, and women's and children's rights. Karmeen Herawi, 15, lost out on her education due to the Taliban's prohibition on female education. Now learning to read and write, she has ambitions of becoming a parliamentarian

In addition, the new government has been seen by many Afghans as weak, corrupt and inefficient at dealing with the huge problems that ordinary people are facing. Partly as a result of this, the Taliban has seen renewed support in many areas.

In recent years, Afghan leaders and the international community have opened negotiations with the Taliban with the view to brokering a peace that would enable foreign troops to withdraw (international forces plan to hand over combat duties to Afghan forces by the end of 2014). Many Afghan women are fearful that if members of the Taliban are granted power in a reintegration or reconciliation process, they will seek to curtail the rights of women. Taliban behaviour in parts of the country where they already hold sway suggests that they may indeed try to do so.

Christian Aid interviewed Shinkai Kharokail, a prominent women's rights activist, MP and director of the Afghan Women's Education Centre (AWEC). On the subject of a potential deal with the Taliban, Shinkai said simply: 'I do not want to lose what we have achieved so far for one second and I do not want to go back to my previous life. A peace process should not come at any cost.'



Christian Aid has worked in Afghanistan for almost 30 years under four different regimes – from the Soviet occupation to the current government

If there is any way we can help your group please email cpartnership@christian-aid.org

Christian Aid in Afghanistan

Christian Aid has been working in Afghanistan for nearly three decades. We began supporting partner organisations in 1984 and a country office was set up in 1997. Our approach of working through local Afghan partners means that through four different political regimes we have been able to continually reach those communities who are suffering.

Today, our work has two main focuses – tackling food insecurity, and the rights of women. We also carry out a significant amount of advocacy work, both with the UK government regarding UK policy in Afghanistan, and by providing support to partners to lobby the Afghan government on internal issues.

Christian Aid works in the western, northern and central areas of Afghanistan. Our main country office is in Herat, and we have a support office in the capital city of Kabul.

Endnotes

- 1 CIA World Factbook www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html
- 2 UNDP Human Development Index <http://hdr.undp.org/en/statistics>
- 3 UNICEF www.unicef.org/infobycountry/afghanistan_statistics.html
- 4-7 CIA World Factbook www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html
- 8 DFID www.dfid.gov.uk/afghanistan
- 9 UN Women www.unifem.org/worldwide/asia_pacific
- 10 DFID www.dfid.gov.uk/afghanistan
- 11 CIA World Factbook www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html

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