

Women under siege in Afghanistan

By Soutik Biswas
BBC News, Kabul



For the past three months, Afghan female MP Shukria Barakzai has been receiving a letter saying she may be targeted by a suicide bomber in the next six months.

The cryptic government letter contains an intelligence warning that Ms Barakzai's life is under threat and she should be careful. She is one of six MPs getting such a letter these days.

"That is all that the government does - send a letter by mail once every month saying my life is under threat. There isn't talk of even providing security," says the feisty parliamentarian and mother of three daughters.

Ms Barakzai says she is being targeted by "various elements" because of her speeches against the country's warlords, her support for women's rights and for her criticisms of Pakistan.

AFGHANISTAN'S FUTURE

This week, BBC News is taking an in-depth look at the challenges facing Afghanistan's people and the peacekeepers. Stories include: the state of the Taleban; corruption; the drugs problem; and attacks on schools.

"I am going crazy. My friends are telling me to leave the country. My husband is worried. After all, I am also a mother and a wife," says the journalist-turned-MP.

When you consider that two women journalists have been killed recently in and around Kabul, you realise that even women of influence and power in Afghanistan live and work in fear under threats from warlords, the Taleban and other insurgent groups.

Six years after the departure of the repressive Taleban this is the paradox of women in Afghanistan. They now have a say and a position under the country's constitution. But they have to work in an atmosphere of fear and intimidation.

The good news is that the rights of Afghan women have been enshrined in the constitution. It even asks the government to bring changes in the law to combat traditions that work against them.

Women can participate in every walk of life, including politics. Of the 361 members of parliament today, 91 are women.

Women have also begun talking about forced marriages, honour killings, abortions and rape in a traditionally male-dominated society. Local human rights groups have begun documenting such atrocities.

Insecure

The bad news is that the state cannot protect women and ensure that they can go about their work

safely. Even an affluent, influential city-bred MP like Ms Barakzai is now tense about her future.

"When I leave home these days on work, I am not quite sure whether I will be back [alive]. Life has become so insecure. I am not planning to leave the country yet, but I do have to think about my kids," says the MP.

Fellow female MP Tooarpekay, the only woman parliamentarian from the restive Zabul province, echoes the same sentiment.

"There have been many attacks on women workers in Zabul. I am worried about the rise of Taleban," says the MP who studied in a boys' school.

Ms Tooarpekay should know - she has worked in Zabul, where the Taleban are now highly active, for the past 22 years as a school teacher, community and health worker.

When she stood for the elections two years ago, her 22-year-old brother was killed by the Taleban. She has soldiered on in her new job as an MP.

To add to her problems, she has not been paid her monthly salary of \$937 for the past three months.

Grim stories

If this is the plight of some of the most "powerful" women in the country, the state of ordinary women across the country is obviously much worse.

Afghanistan's Independent Human Rights Commission, for example, alone documented over 1,500 cases of atrocities against women last year.

The details make for grim reading - a third of these women were victims of domestic violence - simply called "beating" in the rights group report - some 200 of them were married off forcibly, 98 of them set themselves on fire, and over 100 of them tried to take their lives by consuming poison.

Now the rights group is worried about the rising number of women who are taking to drugs in the countryside.

Worst sufferers

"Jirgas [tribal councils] are still deciding the fate of the women in most rural areas. Most of the judgements go against the women," says Soraya Sobhrang, a former gynaecologist who runs the women's rights department of the Human Rights Commission.

"We have the constitution and the courts. Who are the jirgas to decide on women?"

In the end, analysts say, it is a weak, feeble and a largely corrupt state machinery which is just not carrying out its duties - ruling with a firmer constitutionally mandated hand, and giving women more security, sometimes even from their own menfolk and community.

Zabul is a good example of this apathy - Ms Tooarpekay says government officials are lax and insincere about simple demands of local people, joblessness is rife and there are few schools.

"All this drives people into the arms of the Taleban. And the women become the worst sufferers again," she says.

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