

In the Name of God, the Most Merciful, the Most Kind



March 10, 2016

Say No to Smoking

International No Smoking Day is celebrated each year on 9th March, so as to highlight the dangers of smoking and the different diseases that are related to smoking. It also highlights how it is related with other social issues and in certain cases even multiplies them. It is also to highlight the influence of smoking that the smokers cause to non-smokers. At the same time, it emphasizes measures by governments to control the issue and do not let more people influenced by it.

Unfortunately, smoking is a sort of problem that is not considered a serious problem by many. There are certain people who take the issue very lightly and, in fact, consider it a non-issue. However, the problems related to it are innumerable and can be a serious problem for the world as whole.

Therefore, it is necessary to understand that the issue of smoking is really a grave concern. According to the statistics from World Health Organization (WHO), there are more than one billion smokers around the world. And, even more unfortunate facts is that 80 percent of them belong to lower and middle classes of the society. They are the people who hardly can afford smoking tobacco and can neither avail health facilities if they get sick because of it.

Moreover, WHO reveals that around 100 million people died in 20th century because of tobacco and there are fears that around one billion people may die in 21st century if the current trends are maintained in smoking. Smoking tobacco is one of the main causes of lung and mouth cancers and is also responsible for different sorts of infections related to respiratory and digestive system. Statistics show that if there are no urgent measures taken, the annual death toll from tobacco consumption can rise to more than eight million people by 2030, which is really very high and alarming, but not realized so by many countries and authorities.

One of the main causes of high consumption of tobacco is its easy availability. In most of the countries tobacco or cigarettes that contain tobacco can be found in almost all the streets and at very cheap price. Moreover, there are no restrictions of age group as well; even children can buy them and then consume them without any difficulty.

One of the main reasons of such convenient availability is undoubtedly the illicit tobacco trade. Weaker governments are not able to control the influx of different sorts of tobacco because of the pressures exerted by the giants producers; neither they are able to have strong tax policies regarding their trade.

Afghanistan is also one of the countries where tobacco consumption is very high and there are no tangible measures to curb the situation. Afghanistan's Ministry of Public Health (MoPH), has on certain occasions highlighted that the proliferation of smuggled tobacco and easy access to it are the basic reasons that smoking has become so inexpensive and widespread in Afghanistan. Even children have become the victims and are now suffering from smoking addiction.

According to a study by MoPH, about 23 percent of students between the ages of 13 to 15 smoke in Afghanistan. If this is the condition of school going children what can be expected from the children who do not go to school and are child laborers. Definitely, their percentage must be very high as the places where they work are very vulnerable! Moreover, the parents do not deal with this issue seriously. As some of them, themselves, smoke and do not consider it a threat, therefore, they do not make their children abstain it either.

It is really important that the government deals with this situation seriously. Government must ensure measures to discourage the illicit trade of tobacco. Heightening the tax rates on tobacco can be very much helpful in this regard. In addition to increase in tax on tobacco, it is also essential that the government must have a particular strategy to deal with the situation.

It should make sure that it adheres to the WHO's Protocol to Eliminate the Illicit Trade in Tobacco Products, which requires a wide range of measures related to the tobacco supply chain, with the licensing of imports, exports and production of tobacco products; the formation of tracking and tracing systems and the imposition of penal sanctions on those responsible for illicit trade. It would also criminalize illicit production and cross border smuggling.

Smoking tobacco can, undoubtedly, give rise to serious health conditions and the tobacco industry will keep on increasing its productions and find out ways of finding new consumers. Its producers would not even hesitate to target young children and would make sure that their trade must never diminish. It is, therefore, responsibility of the government and the aware sections of the society to emphasize on the vices of this evil and carve out measures to control it.



The Long Way ahead for Women in Afghanistan

By Abdul Ahad Bahrami

Afghanistan celebrated the International Women's Day on Tuesday while the country's overall performance in promotion of rights and status of women is considered as poor during past fifteen years. Afghanistan is one of the poorest and most conservative nations in the world. This along with the ongoing insurgency has impacted the efforts to reconstruct the country and improve humanitarian standards. Afghan women, as one of the most vulnerable segments of the society, still suffer public and domestic violence, are targeted by insurgent groups and have low participation in public life. One of the key objectives of the international community in Afghanistan in past over a decade has been to evaluate women's status and improve conditions of the highly vulnerable segment of the society. However, the results are mixed of failures and progresses.

There have been remarkable achievements in terms of women's rights in Afghanistan since the fall of the Taliban regime. Afghanistan has come a long way forward in the efforts to boost women's status and promote their rights. Now a large portion of the women and girls population - at least in urban areas and somehow in rural but secure provinces - have access to public education or work outside. Millions of girls go to schools and universities with the hopes of a better future. There are women politicians in public and government institutions representing the once inferior gender and helping the campaigns aimed on boosting women's status. On the other hand, the new political establishment was perhaps the biggest victory for women in Afghanistan, recognizing women's equality to men as well as their roles in the public arena. This is in contrast with the situation during the Taliban regime when women were degraded and were banned from working or appearing in the public without company of male relatives.

However, there does not seem to be a convincing proportion in terms of the progresses achieved and the collective efforts made during past fifteen years. True there have been considerable progresses for Afghan women both in boosting their economic and legal status and promoting their social status in the conservative society. However, this does not justify the challenges that exist today given the extraordinary international aid aimed at improving human rights and women's status in the country. The presence of Afghan women in public life is often taken as examples of the achievements made for improving women's status. The existing challenges and deprivations outweigh by far the achievements made in past years. The international assistance provided for improving women's status has been huge while we see relatively limited progresses in this area.

Perhaps the most well-known challenge facing women in Afghanistan is the male-dominated attitude towards women and widespread violence stemming from the Afghan conservatism. There are endless cases of domestic violence committed by male relatives violence reported to the government or human rights organizations. In the eve of solar year 1394, the brutal killing of Farkhonda by a group of angry men in the center of Kabul shocked the nation. It hit the headlines and stayed for later weeks and months

as Afghans along with activists watched the processes of trials of the perpetrators. Other cases such as a young woman being raped by her father for about ten years, another woman having nose chopped off by husband and other cases of deaths and public whipping of women renewed the shock and awe among the public while they did not result to cessation of violence against women in Afghanistan.

However, the efforts to eradicate violence against women have incessantly continued. According to rights groups, growing number of domestic violence are reported to the authorities or the human rights organizations, which is attributed to increase of awareness. Another reason could be women's growing sensitivity to their rights as well as their outreach ability to communicate with the local authorities and pro-women groups. This indicates that the women are getting on board to fight for their rights in the male-dominated conservative society. Afghan women have played a crucial role in the efforts to improve the situation for their peer beings and promote their rights. The women now have key roles in pro-rights organizations and other public and government institutions involved with issues of human and women's rights.

The sad thing is that the Afghan conservatism is very deep-rooted and common in the country, particularly in rural and insecure areas across the country. The general attitude among Afghans towards women is painfully conservative with inclinations to male supremacy. There is a long way ahead for overcoming the conservative attitude in the society. Only through long-term campaigns and public education Afghanistan can overcome the poisoning irrational Afghan conservatism. Even many of the educated Afghans threaten their female family members improperly and as inferior family members.

On one hand women cannot be separated from the overall situation in society as the day-to-day violence impacts both women and men populations. The ongoing war and insecurity across the country foils the efforts to make differences and improve human standards in the country. A large portion of Afghanistan's population suffers excruciating poverty and low living standards, which, in turn, affects the women. The existing challenges such as insecurity, widespread corruption, poverty and low levels of literacy are all related as a chain and work in further deteriorating the status of women. General backwardness, poverty and unemployment, organized crime, low quality health and educational services do not differentiate men and women. The overall situation in the country affects women's lives in many ways. In addition to the specific causes mentioned, these have made Afghanistan one of the worst places in the world for women and mothers. The national unity government has had better performance in boosting the status of women and promoting women's rights compared to the previous governments led by former president Hamid Karzai. The national unity government took bold measures to boost women's representation in the politics and governance. This would definitely help the campaign to improve women's conditions. However, there is still a long way ahead to fight the violence against women.

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Women Are Deemed Inferior

By Hujjatullah Zia

A group of feminists believe that women cannot get rid of sexual cruelties and atrocities by gradual changes and amendment. According to them, patriarchy is a systemic nomenon; gender equality is possible only by demolishing the system of patriarchy. They believe that those social and cultural norms which reiterate the slender figures and sympathetic attitudes of women, aim to extend their inferiority and obedience. They further believe that objectifying women through media, models and advertisements change women to sexual objects with the intention of amusing and pleasing men.

Afghan women have suffered greatly under patriarchy, especially during the Taliban's regime, and their rights and dignity were violated on a large scale in Afghanistan. Their blood is still spilled and they fell prey to violence and honor-killing on the grounds of their gender. Women are treated as pariah and stoned to death in tribal belts and in Taliban-dominated areas. Members of the Taliban insurgents sprayed corrosive acid on the faces of school girls and flagellated the women in desert court with great inhumanity. In suicide bombings, the lifeless bodies of women, as drops of boiling blood trickle down their wounds, fill one with a strong sense of sorrow and disgust.

Women human rights are trampled upon in collective and individual spheres. Their freedoms and social role are curtailed, mainly in villages - where traditional custom holds strong sway. Not surprisingly, the girls are not entitled to decide whom to live with and it is their parents to choose their life-partners - this is almost common in some rural areas across the country. The birth of female child can hardly force smile to her parents' lips and it is assumed that they will bear the brunt of discrimination and patriarchal system.

On Tuesday March 08, 2016 marked as Woman's International Day around the world, including Afghanistan. However, the tragic death of Farkhonda, a 27-year-old woman killed by angry mob on the 19 of March, 2015, adds insult to the public injuries and reminds the bloody episode and peels the scab that just covered the open wounds. The Office of the Attorney General of Afghanistan said on Monday that it has concluded Farkhonda's case and sentenced 17 persons to prison. "Special tribunals set by the AGO for addressing violence against women so far have completed 9,572 cases in the provinces. Amongst the cases processed so far are 828 cases of murder, 2,453 cases of sexual abuse, 75 cases of kidnapping of women, 253 cases of forced marriages, 1,912 case related to beating and some other eighteen cases".

Perhaps, the images of abused and helpless Afghan women incessantly flood our minds, undermining the significant role of women

as agents of change in Afghanistan. During the 1920s and 70s, a period of economic and political stability, a large number of Afghan women asserted their rights and continued their education and professional pursuits. These women belonged to a privileged economic background; all the same their role and aspirations offer the world an alternative narrative. Acknowledging the agency, contributions, and strong voice of Afghan women does not undermine the stories of women like Nazia, an 18-year-old Afghan woman whose nose and ears were sliced off by her husband and appeared on the cover of Time magazine in August 2010, or Sitara, a 30-year-old woman whose nose and lips were lopped off by her addict husband in Herat province in 2013 and their audacious spirit, whose story of sufferings too many for our world.

Despite the progress made, women's struggle for civic and human rights still has a long way to go. Three decades of war has left many Afghans both eager for change and afraid of it. There are still many instances of ordinary women experiencing domestic violence, sexually abused, or being forced into marriage. Women in senior leadership roles - such as in parliament or the police - are still being murdered. Some men feel threatened by the presence of women in senior positions. These men see women's rights as the "westernization" of Afghan culture.

To the unmitigated chagrin of Afghan women, the Afghanistan's presidential election in the solar year of 1393 was not a panacea for their bleeding wounds. They fell victim to gang violence and rape constantly as ever before. In other words, the macabre stories and hackneyed phrases of violence made repeated headlines on national and international newspapers - and continue up to now.

Women should no more suffer men's fractious attitudes, mental and physical tortures. The religious guidelines and country's law should be practiced upon and the patriarchal system should end so that women's rights and dignity be held in respect. The Constitution of Afghanistan states in article 22 as, "Any kind of discrimination and distinction between citizens of Afghanistan shall be forbidden. The citizens of Afghanistan, man and woman, have equal rights and duties before the law." Moreover, article 24 asserts, "Liberty is the natural right of human beings. This right has no limits unless affecting others freedoms as well as the public interest, which shall be regulated by law. Liberty and human dignity are inviolable. The state shall respect and protect liberty as well as human dignity."

Since women are considered inferior neither in religious narratives nor in country's law, the government should enforce the law strictly and empower women through safeguarding their rights and dignity.

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Daily Outlook
AFGHANISTAN
The Leading Independent Newspaper

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