

UNAMA PRESS BRIEFING ON LAUNCH OF UNIFEM'S REPORT ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN AFGHANISTAN 'UNCOUNTED AND DISCOUNTED'

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Today's guest

Thank you and with that if we can move to our guest speaker. If I may introduce Meryem Aslan who is the country director for UNIFEM, the UN's leading agency for women's affairs here in Afghanistan. UNIFEM has just recently published a report called "*Uncounted and Discounted*" which is available on the side table. I will now hand over to Meryem – thank you Meryem.

Meryem Aslan, Country Director, UNIFEM:

Today I will talk about the report "[*Uncounted and Discounted*](#)" - a report prepared by UNIFEM Afghanistan. First I would like to give you an overview of violence against women (VAW) across the world and then I would like to talk about the aims of this study, some general findings and some recommendations that came out of the study.

Before starting I would like to thank all the Government agencies and non-governmental organizations and UN agencies who contributed to this study and you will see in the report all those who contributed to this study. Without their help we could not have done this.

I will start with a statement that looks very general, but unfortunately, it is true. One of the most persisting and widespread violations against basic rights is violence against women – a universality the human community seems to be achieving very easily, despite all the good intentions and policy declarations.

I will give you a few examples, which gives the worldwide perspective. At least one out of every three women has been beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused at least once in her lifetime.

The abuser is usually a member of her own family or someone known to her. Women are often in greatest danger in the place where they should feel the safest - within their own families.

At least one woman in five worldwide will suffer rape or attempted rape. Many rapes go unreported because of the associated stigma and trauma and the lack of sympathetic treatment by legal systems.

As we all know, when it comes to development, Afghanistan lags behind many countries. But unfortunately when it comes to violence against women the figures we see in Afghanistan are comparable to the world figures.

One of the first steps to eliminate violence against women is to break the taboo and to stop treating it as a private matter. Hence this is why there has been a lot of concentration since the 1990s on recording cases of violence against women, to do more research on VAW and to understand the causes and consequences of violence so that appropriate policies can be developed and the issues can be addressed.

In Afghanistan there are still very limited reports on VAW, however the research and efforts on the issue have now started. This report you have all received is based on a secondary data research project on violence against women in Afghanistan.

The aim of this research is to establish a baseline on the nature and extent of violence against women in Afghanistan as a first step to move beyond anecdotal evidence used in the discourse of VAW in Afghanistan. We also wanted to understand through this research the strengths and shortcomings of existing reporting and support mechanisms for women who are victims of violence.

The exercise is in support of the Government's commitment to eradicate violence against women - a commitment initiated by a Presidential decree in 2005.

The data used in the report was collected between 1 January 2003 and 30 June 2005 and refers to 1,327 cases. The results of this research do not reflect an overall estimate of violence against women in Afghanistan. It is very likely that, like anywhere in the world, VAW is under-reported.

The general findings based on the 1,327 cases are:

- Violence affects women of all ages without regard to marital status, education or employment;
- Violence against women is committed by actors within the family, community and state;
- Violence begins to affect women at an early stage;
- Abuse perpetrated by a member of a woman's family or someone known to her is widespread;
- Violence against women perpetrated by an intimate partner appears endemic;
- Perpetrators of VAW are largely men, but in our study women account for 10.4 percent of the total perpetrators;
- Anecdotal evidence about the rampant and entrenched nature of violence in the family can be further substantiated by the high rate of domestic violence revealed in this study;
- Acts of violence against women are taking place with impunity; it appears that the government, communities and families are not doing enough to prevent violence against women;
- Women need better access to services, particularly when they are seeking help from violence perpetrated by the family, which is almost exclusively the traditional support structure for women in Afghanistan.

I will give one example. A two-year old girl was promised in marriage by her family to an older man who died when she was six-years old. His son claimed that the girl should marry someone else from the family. The case went to the village elders who decided in favour of the son. The girl has threatened to kill herself if she is forced to marry.

Another example - a woman was jailed and charged with adultery. In prison, she was raped by prison guards, and she was not allowed to see her children.

Abuse perpetrated by a member of a woman's family or someone known to her is widespread. Again from the study, of 1,327 cases eighty-two percent of the total violent acts were committed by family members, including intimate partners. And perpetrators include husbands, father-in-laws, sons, cousins, uncles and sometimes female members of the family. Amongst this eighty-two percent, more than 40 percent of violent acts were committed by intimate partners. Perpetrators of VAW are largely men, but in our study, women accounted for 10.4 percent of the total perpetrators.

The anecdotal evidence about the rampant and entrenched nature of violence in family can be further substantiated by the high rate of domestic violence revealed in this study.

Acts of violence against women are taking place with impunity. It appears that the Government, communities and families where women should be feeling the safest are not doing enough to prevent violence against women. Women need better access to services, particularly when they are seeking help from violence perpetrated by the family, which is almost exclusively the traditional support structure for women in Afghanistan.

Many recommendations are made in this report. I will just mention the major ones:

- there is a need to streamline the recording of cases of VAW;
- there is a need to review the laws to ensure that women's rights are protected and enforced;
- there is a need to reinforce the implementation of laws to ensure the prosecution of perpetrators;
- existing support agencies need to work more closely with each other to increase the efficiency of their support to victims of violence.

I thank you and I am ready to take any questions that you might have.

Questions & Answers

Question: (translated from Dari) What are the major types of violence against women in this country?

UNIFEM: The places where women face violence is in the family, the community or the state. The types of violence faced by women include physical violence, psychological violence and sexual violence. Within each category there are various types of violence faced by women. Thirty-seven percent is physical. Sexual violence is 46.4 percent and psychological is 14.3 percent. These figures relate to violence perpetrated by family members.

Question: (translated from Dari) I believe that the violence has an economic aspect in our country and if the level of economic power in families were to increase the percentage of violence would decrease. What is your view and are you doing work towards this regard?

UNIFEM: Unfortunately the worldwide figures don't say that to us. The worldwide figures tell us that violence against women does not know class, ethnicity, culture and religion. It affects women all over the world. What is true is that if you are poor and the economic situation is not good and you are dependant, it makes you more vulnerable and it takes your ability to maneuver, and it takes away your ability to leave the violent situation and run away from it. And I would guess if Afghanistan progresses economically, and women and men in this country get a better economic situation, women will at least be able to seek help more easily than they are getting now. At the moment the women in Afghanistan are locked and caged in this situation.

Senior PIO: If I could just add, let's take the example of women in North America or Europe, which are considerably more prosperous than Afghanistan, they are

grappling with issues of domestic violence too. So to make a correlation between economic progress and a lower incidence of domestic violence would probably not be an accurate assumption.

Question: (translated from Dari) Your report talks about violence against women and maternal mortality in the country. Is this only research or have you got an action plan to face this issue?

UNIFEM: Correction, the report does not talk about maternal mortality rate. We talk about violence against women. Sometimes the maternal mortality rate might be caused by violence but this report is only about violence against women. Secondly, in our opinion research is very important. This is research however our activities are not limited to research only. The more we talk about violence against women, the more we can get programs established and that is what this research is all about, to give the possibility to government to develop agencies, for the UN to make more informed programs and policies. Other things being done in the country to address violence against women are varied. It is not only limited to research. There are programs geared towards the protection of victims of violence and these are the safe houses that are at the moment limited in Afghanistan. They are in Herat, Kabul and Mazar. There are support networks that are coming together to discuss and take measure in ways to support victims of violence and everybody is trying to be a bit creative in trying to find out how victims of violence can be supported between their own communities and families. Although limited, there are legal aid programs that are trying to help women legally when they come with issues dealing with the law. And there are plans to widen this program through paralegal services that is being led by UNIFEM and the Ministry of Women's Affairs together, but also the Ministry of Interior, UNAMA and CANADEM. There are also referral centres to help women find hospitals and police and legal aid services.

Senior PIO: It may also be worth mentioning that the UN Population Fund – UNFPA – have been instrumental in helping Kabul police in setting a number of domestic violence centers attached to police stations where police officers are working closely with victims of domestic violence and an appropriate response can be given to those who are suffering from domestic violence. I'm also aware from our regional offices where our Human Rights Officers are involved in human rights training to new police recruits to sensitize them to the issues of domestic violence so that they respond appropriately when victims are identified. But I think we'll be the first to acknowledge that a lot more needs to be done in this area.

Question: (translated from Dari) In our country, and in other countries of the world, there are cases of honor killings. Have you any research on this topic relating to Afghanistan?

UNIFEM: In this research we had cases of honor killings and it is known in this country as well as others, but unfortunately we don't have exact figures of honor killings. The information we have is very anecdotal and this research covers limited cases and does not give us the prevalent rate of violence in this country. So apart from being one of the ways to kill women, I am unable to give you figures. The report does have 33 cases of murder by intimate partners, but does not report on honor killings specifically.

Question: With regard to women and violence against women, I realize this is related to power and education and not knowing how to deal with people when those two things come in conflict. Based on your research is there any emphasis that will be placed on educating men and how they deal with their issues of power and also

educating young boys in schools, and young girls, not to expect this type of treatment, and also on the part of young men not to give it out?

UNIFEM: Addressing violence against women needs different interventions at different levels. One of the recommendations to come out of the report is education and awareness raising campaigns, both for women and men. But when we talk about education, I won't rely on education per se, and again this is based on world figures. I think what kind of education we are giving and how much tolerance we promote, or not promote, to violence through our education is very important. Unfortunately what we see across the world is that tolerance of violence against women is very high in society and very high in Afghanistan as well and that is one of the reasons. Of course we explain it as the exercise of the subordination of women and power and the way of subordinating women, but I don't think we have managed to break that vicious cycle in the world. Again I will say education is extremely important because then it gives the woman the faculty to say no to violence and I know that both men and women have to reach a point when they both say no to that violence. It is much more important for women to say no to that violence and have all the mechanisms to escape from that violence

Question: This report mentions customs and customary law as being one of the causes of violence against women and it also says that existing laws need strengthening. How much of this is due to the absence of practicing modern law and reference to customary law by the judicial process, by the structures of the police? Is there any specific intervention that is proposed to strengthen the existing modern laws?

UNIFEM: In the report you will see that violence against women in the community is nine percent of the cases we collected, but we think it is greatly underestimated and unfortunately we weren't able to distinguish between some of the cases that are counted as family violence that can overlap and be both family and community violence, due to the customary law that is being practiced. And there are specific types of violence that are imposed through customary law, like 'badal' when there is a tribal disagreement – a woman is exchanged to stop that tribal disagreement, or what they call 'bad' practice, when someone is killed from one family the woman is mostly used to settle that blood feud and there are practices such as if a woman's husband is deceased, she is forced to marry a relative of the deceased husband. There are specific practices that are imposed on a woman through customary law. Again there are certain interventions to try to overcome this problem. There is research being done on customary law and its effects on women. One is carried out together by UNIFEM, the Afghan Independent Human Rights Commission and the Afghan Women and Children Legal Foundation. Another research is being carried out by the Afghan Research and Evaluation Unit – AREU - but on the other end the aim is to understand how the customary law influences women and what role it plays in the violation of her human rights. Then there are other initiatives that are trying to strengthen the formal justice system and that is the review of all the criminal and civil laws and comparison of them with the constitution and international conventions and Sharia so that the recommendations for the revision of the law can be made. And as I said before there are big pushes and initiatives to increase the access of women to justice through legal aid and paralegal services and the idea there is of course to move people from customary law practices towards a formal justice system.

Question: I think the problem now is not just to provide data because almost every year we have recorded data. We all live here and we know what the problem is, there is severe violence against women. The problem is the continued impunity, from top to bottom towards perpetrators of violence against women. We have not

witnessed one perpetrator being prosecuted and also the activism is lacking from the UN or Human Rights Commission to put pressure on the government. For example, a quick reference to the case of the woman who was stoned to death in Faizabad. The person who ordered the death sentence is still a dominant commander in the district. What can the UN do to put pressure on the government to reduce these impunities?

UNIFEM: First, I disagree with you that we have enough data. It is a very important problem and not just in the violence against women. It is in every working subject we are working with in Afghanistan. We don't have enough data. And data is very important for governments all over the world, not just in Afghanistan, to develop policies to understand what the situation is for women and men, what the problems are. If the governments don't have those tools they cannot make those programs. This is very important for a woman, because if they are not counted, they are not going to be counted in policies, in budgets, in programs, so I don't agree that we have enough data. As for impunity, you are right, but as the report says impunity does not come just from the government. It is from the community. It is the family. It is the government. And like I said 82 percent of the cases are happening in the family and they are coming from husbands, from brothers, from brothers-in-law and from fathers-in-law. I agree completely with you that the government needs to do more, because they are the duty-bearer. The government has the duty to protect the rights of women and men in the country. And not enough is being done by the government due to capacity problems that are not possible to sort out immediately and sometimes for political reasons and I think the best the government can do at the moment is, the capacity problem everybody understands, but stopping to use women's causes for political reasons will be the biggest benefit for Afghan women at the moment. But as citizens of the country we also have to remember we don't only have rights, OK the governments are responsible for protecting our rights, but as citizens we have responsibilities as well. And I believe that in Afghanistan, as in other countries, everybody has the right, but also the responsibility to remember that when the others rights start, your rights stop. And I believe that here, as in any other country, the fathers, the brothers, the brothers-in-law and fathers-in-law are responsible for protecting their children's rights. It is not only the responsibility of the government, it is the responsibility of the grown ups, the responsibility of the parents to protect the rights of the children and if a parent can give a two-year old girl into a marriage, then I would question whether that father or mother fulfills his or her responsibilities.

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