

Women and education in Afghanistan

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Assignment 3

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Following the destruction of the World Trade center in New York and America's subsequent war on terror, Afghanistan has been in the news. Females in Afghanistan are generally not well educated and this essay examines some of the historical, cultural and religious reasons why this might be so.

Illiteracy in Afghanistan is very high, and women are less likely to be literate than men (Emadi, 2005; Ewans, 2001). If being literate is "the ability to read a newspaper and write a letter" (Coleman, 2004, "A Fairer Future," para. 2) then the female literacy rate is below 20%. However, some women have been able to gain a good education. Families have sent daughters overseas to be educated and at times girls have been educated within the country. Women often train to work in the health sector because, for religious reasons, it is inappropriate for a woman to expose parts of her body to a male medical practitioner (Latifa, 2002).

Afghanistan has had a turbulent history, with much ethnic and tribal fighting, and is underdeveloped unsettled (Emadi, 2005; Ewans, 2001). It was ruled by kings until 1973 when a republic was declared. The People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan staged a socialist coup in 1978 and tried reforms. Conservatives resisted and in 1979 Russia invaded to support the socialists. Russian invaders were unpopular and left in 1989. Tribal warlords fought for control until the ultra orthodox Taliban, religious students trained in Pakistan, took over in 1996 to restore order. They were extremely repressive and closed girls' schools, stopped women from working, and insisted women wear a burqa at all times in public. Although America attacked Afghanistan in 2001 to overthrow the Taliban, the country remains very unsettled (Emadi, 2005; Ewans, 2001).

Afghan society is very conservative and patriarchal and is “a mosaic of various ethnic and linguistic communities” (Emadi, 2002, p. 29). Many people are still part of a tribe whose members are genealogically linked and descended from a single ancestor. Family and kinship ties are extremely important, women’s main role in society is motherhood and children are regarded as an asset. Most people enter an arranged marriage in their late teens; many people marry someone closely related to them so that property stays within the family group (Emadi, 2005).

The population of Afghanistan is 99% Muslim. Most are Sunni with a minority of Shia, which includes a small group of Isma’ili (Emadi, 2005). Sunnis live according to Sharia, the body of commandments based on religious texts (Latifa, 2002). However, women’s status in society cannot be attributed solely to Islam. As Moghadam (2003) points out the Jewish and Hindu religions are equally patriarchal. Moghadam suggests that it is family and social structures that work against women gaining an education. The Aga Khan, leader of the Isma’ili, has recently donated a large sum of money to establish a women’s university in Afghanistan (Emadi, 2005).

In general Afghani women have a high rate of illiteracy, although some have received a good education. One thing preventing women gaining an education is lack of facilities because the country has been in a state of upheaval or civil war for the past 28 years. Conservative and patriarchal attitudes of some families add to this but the role of Islam is not clear.

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