

Suicide in Afghan Women Increased Despite Apparent Progress in Legal Rights, Access to Information, and Freedom of Expression

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Abstract:

Introduction: Women have been underrepresented in Afghan culture throughout recorded history. It was anticipated that with international intervention, living conditions for Afghan women would improve and, as a measure of a healthier society, suicide rates in women would fall. However, to the contrary, it seems that the suicide rate in women has increased. Poisoning is still the most common method of suicide in Afghan women but self-immolation is increasing alarmingly^{1,5}. In the current study, we examine the post-war improvement in living conditions and increased suicide rate in Afghan women.

Methods: We searched published and unpublished reports on women's health and human rights in Afghanistan, specifically looking for data on suicidality.

Results: Afghanistan had among the lowest suicide rates globally for women in 1960s (0.25/100,000). Currently, the rate of completed suicide in women may be as high as 71.5/100,000, making Afghanistan among countries with the highest number of suicides in women in the world.

Conclusion: Self-immolation and suicide are challenging to study in Afghanistan. While human rights for women have improved considerably as compared to their status during the Taliban or Mujahideen (1991-2001) eras, the suicide rate has appeared to increase markedly. The higher rates of females losing their lives to suicide in progressive provinces of Afghanistan are alarming. A question arises: does knowledge of "freedom of choice" enjoyed by women in developed countries make living conditions less tolerable for women in progressive provinces in Afghanistan? The authors suggest several possible answers: 1. Legally granted increased rights, access to information and freedom of expression have not translated into concomitant real change in families and society at large 2. By committing suicide, Afghan women have learned a powerful means to send their message to the world about the need for change in their poor life conditions 3. The media cover more cases and "copy-cat" suicide ensues. As suicide entails harsh eternal punishment in Islamic traditions, stigma, poor access to help, and difficulty reaching out to women makes suicide prevention more difficult in Afghanistan compared to the rest of the world. International help and assistance will be needed to understand and to curb this disturbing trend.

Introduction:

- A systematic study of suicide (10 years data) in Afghanistan indicated a low suicide rate in Afghan women in 1955-1964⁴ although it is likely that this reflects under-reporting due to stigma and other concerns.
- Since the fall of the Taliban (2001), suicide rates have increased in Afghan women.
- There is a dearth of information on suicide statistics in Afghanistan, and available data from media reports and reports published by international and national organizations are conflicting and unreliable, yet they are the only available source of information. Studies fail to capture accurate data on suicidality in Afghans.
- In clinical settings in progressive provinces, 41-96% of women report suicidal ideation^{2,3}

Results:

	Total	Male	Female	Province	Capitals
Population (million)	31	17.5	13.5	Population in Balkh	1,245,100
Median Age	17.9	17.9	18	Population in Kabul	3,319,794
Ages 15-54 (million)	15.9	8.1	7.8	Population in Herat	1,762,157
Life Expectancy (yrs.)	50.11	48.81	51.47	Population in Wardak	529,343
School Life Expectancy (yrs.)	8	10	6	Total	6,850,600
Literacy (%)	28.1	43.1	12.6	Women	3,356,794
				Average Estimated Suicide Rate in Women in the Capitals (2013) per 100,000	117.6
				Average Estimated Suicide Rate in Women in Afghanistan (2013) per 100,000	16.8

Table 1: Demographic data on Afghans

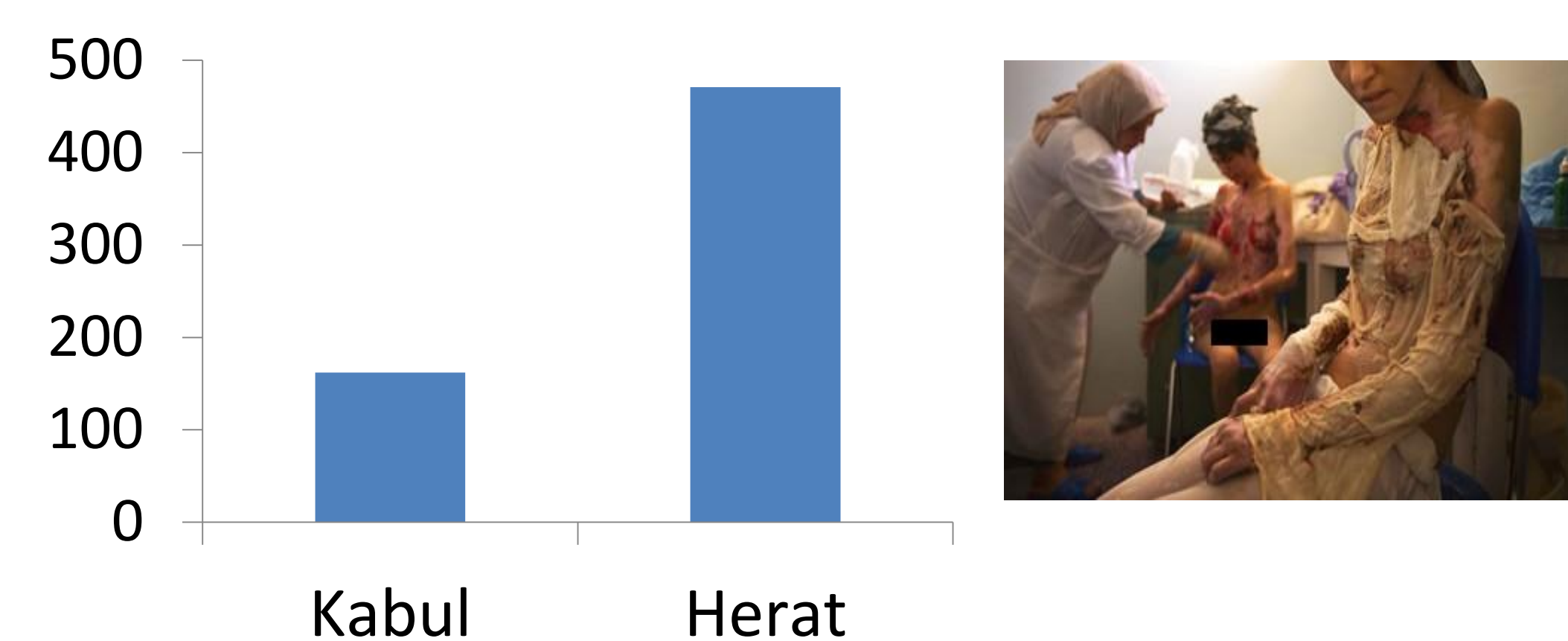


Figure 1: Estimated Media Reported number of self-immolations in women in Kabul and Herat

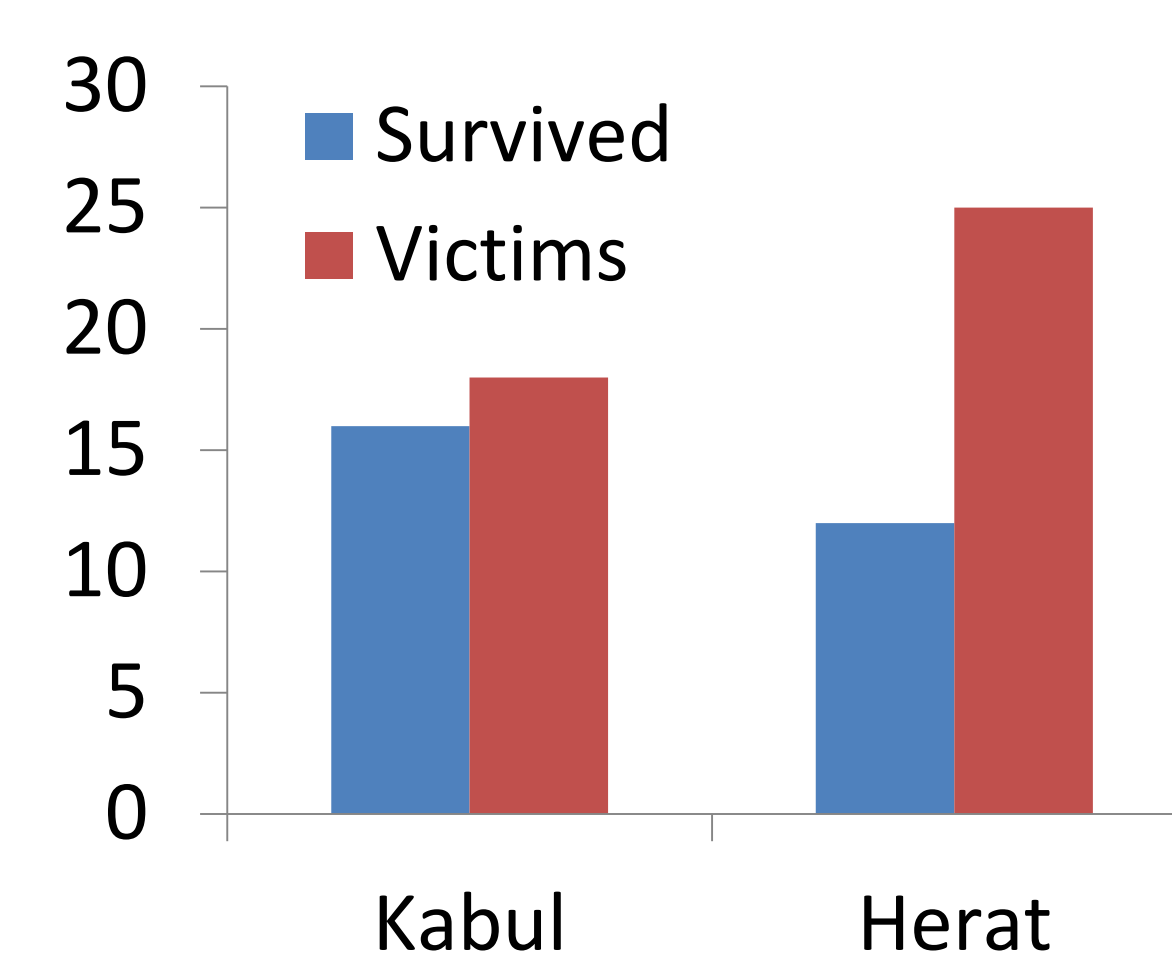


Figure 2: Survival in confirmed cases of self-immolation in Herat and Kabul (Estiqlal Hospital)³

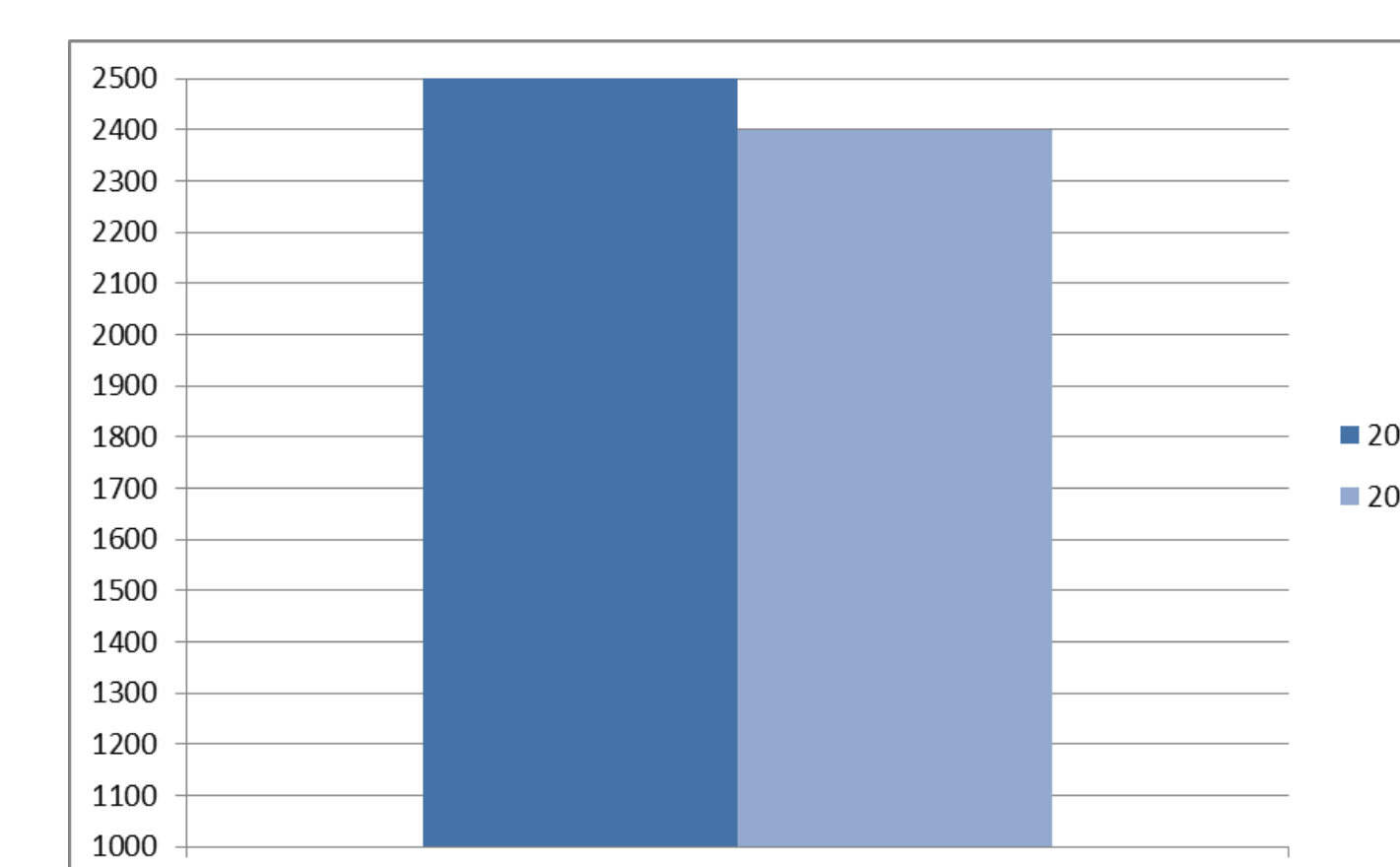


Figure 3: Number Reported Female Victims of Suicide

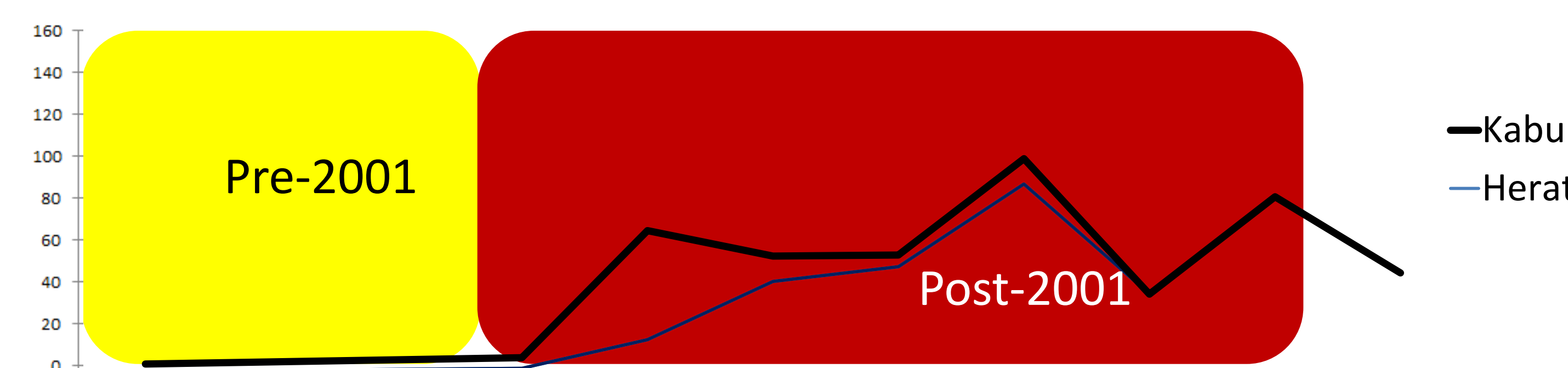


Figure 4: Trend of report of self-immolation in Kabul and Herat (sporadic anecdotal reports pre2001)^{6,7}

Conclusion:

- While accurate suicide data is unavailable in Afghanistan, it appears that the suicide rate in women has vastly increased, although the very low reported rates from the previous 10 years are questionable. Thus high current rates may also reflect more reporting of suicides.
- Most suicides are recorded in progressive provinces. The discrepancy between new freedoms and rights and slower actual cultural and societal change may contribute to the increased suicide rate in Afghan women.
- Women who may have anticipated freedom from oppression may now be rendered hopeless by the apparent failure of local and global efforts to improve living conditions for Afghan women.
- Available data suggest that Afghanistan may have one of the highest suicide rates in women in the world, and the dramatic rise in self-immolation sends a powerful message that Afghan women need international help.
- Preventive strategies include:
 - Accurate suicide data collection
 - Decreasing stigma associated with depression and suicidal ideation
 - Increasing availability of mental health services
 - Educating primary care physicians in identifying depression and suicidality
 - Developing culturally sensitive strategies to educate families, partners and tribal elders as well as women regarding women's rights
 - Helping women with coping strategies and building support networks
 - Establishing suicide hotlines

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