

Correlation between Women's Right Status, Improved Access to Information, Freedom of Expression and Suicide in Afghan Women

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Abstract:

Background: Women have been underrepresented in Afghan culture throughout the recorded history. It was anticipated that with the international intervention, the living condition for Afghan women would improve and, as a measure of healthier society, suicide rate in women would fall. However, the suicide rate has increased on the contrary. In the current study, we examine the post-war improvement in living conditions and increased suicide rate in Afghan women. **Method:** We searched published reports by both governmental and non-governmental (NGO) organizations on women's health and human rights in Afghanistan, specifically looking for data on suicidality. **Results:** Afghanistan, historically, had among the lowest suicide rate globally for women in 1960s (0.25/100,000). Currently the rate of completed suicide may be as high as 71.5/100,000; making Afghanistan among countries with highest number of suicide in women in the world. Particularly self-immolation is on the rise in progressive provinces. **Conclusion:** Improvement in living conditions in Afghanistan has not reduced suicidality in women. Systematic studies are needed to explore underlying causes of this increase in suicide rate in Afghan women.

Method:

Literature available on suicidality in Afghan women were searched that included: Published/unpublished Governmental Reports; Published NGO reports; Published studies in medical literature; News reports.

Results:

- In spite of hundreds of high cost international reports, no accurate data on suicidality exists even in well funded provinces
- Two third of women have been physically assaulted
- Unpublished data indicate a suicide rate of 8 and 16.5 for women (per100,000)
- Suicide has increased in progressive, well-educated provinces with sizable foreign assistance; If adjusted for source of statistics and age, the rate could be **71.5 – 117.6** (Figure 1 and Table 2)
- Physical abuse and relational problems account for large number of suicidal events

Table 1: Demographic data on Afghans

	Total	Male	Female
Population (million)	31	17.5	13.5
Median Age	17.9	17.9	18
Ages 15-54 (million)	15.9	8.1	7.8
Life Expectancy	50.11	48.81	51.47
School Life Expectancy	8	10	6
Literacy	28.1	43.1	12.6

Alarming Self-Immolation as Method of Death:

- Self-immolation on the rise: scant/anecdotal reports in 90s to large confirmed cases in 2000s (Figures 2,3,4)
- In spite of increase media attention, those who attempt self-immolation “report no knowledge of such reports”
- Self-immolation more common in Kabul and Herat, two provinces with highest literacy and access to human rights measures in the country; however, women with lower education attempt the worst self-immolation
- Although not statistically significant, more women die in Herat than in Kabul as a result of self-immolation (figure 2)

Discussion:

- Suicide data unavailable in Afghanistan
- Most suicides are recorded in progressive provinces: Improved women's human rights, freedom of expression and access to information are likely risk factors for suicidality in Afghan women
- Women anticipated freedom from oppression with global support, however, now are rendered hopeless by apparent failure of global effort in improving living condition for Afghan women
- Rise of Self-immolation: a powerful message that Afghan women need international help