

## The Role of Women in India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan

You can tell a lot about a society by looking at the roles women fill. India and Pakistan have both had women leaders. Indira Gandhi in India and Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan each followed in her father's footsteps to go into politics. Each eventually became her country's prime minister. In 2007 Indians elected Pratibha Patil as their first female president. It's a largely ceremonial post—the prime minister has the real power in India. But it's still a significant position.



A woman steps out in public at a local market in Kabul, Afghanistan, with her face uncovered, a punishable offense during the Taliban's rule.

*Photo by Robert Harbison / © 2002 The Christian Science Monitor*

Once the United States drove the Taliban out of power in the weeks after 9/11, the picture for women in Afghanistan was slightly improved.

Even in Afghanistan, the picture for women is slightly improved. At different times, it has allowed women to go without the traditional Muslim veil and opened some coeducational schools. And the 2004 Constitution reserved 25 percent of seats in the parliament's lower house for women.

Despite such gains, however, all three of these countries severely limit women's roles in other ways. All three practice some form of purdah, at least in some places. Literally a "curtain," purdah is the veiling and seclusion of married women. Those who follow this practice believe that it protects family honor. Allowing women to leave home—to go to a job or even to go out shopping—could endanger the family honor, in this tradition. Purdah is certainly not universal. But it is widespread across all these countries.

### India

Purdah is particularly common in northern and central India, among both Hindu and Muslim women. The rules differ between the two communities. But in general purdah is part of a hierarchical society with elaborate rules of deference, or submission. Older people have authority over younger ones and men over women.

The US State Department, in a recent Human Rights Report, found several gross violations of women's human rights in India. It labeled these violations as "serious problems." They are:

- **Domestic violence:** This is a broad term for assaults and other physical attacks within the home. It generally refers to actions by men who beat up their wives and, less often, to actions by women.
- **Dowry deaths:** A common practice in many cultures over the centuries has been for a woman's parents to provide a dowry—property or an amount of money—to her bridegroom at their marriage. But it is a tradition open to abuse. Since 1961 it has been illegal in India for a man to demand a dowry. **The practice continues, however. Many men agree to a "bride price" and then demand more money. In extreme cases, a man kills his wife if her family can't bring him enough.** Official statistics show that husbands and in-laws killed nearly 7,000 women in 2001 over inadequate dowries.
- **Honor crimes:** This refers to cases when a father, brother, or husband kills his daughter, sister, or wife because he believes she has brought dishonor to the family. This may occur if she is seen in public with a man she is not related to, or even if she is raped.
- **Female infanticide:** This is the killing of baby girls.
- **Female feticide:** This occurs when expectant parents abort a fetus because it is female.

### fastFACT

One writer describes purdah in India this way: "The importance of purdah is not limited to family life; rather, these practices all involve restrictions on female activity and access to power and the control of vital resources in a male-dominated society. Restriction and restraint for women in virtually every aspect of life are the basic essentials of purdah."

As is often the case in developing countries, female literacy rates in India lag behind those of men—54 percent compared with 75 percent, according to India's 2001 census. Too few girls are enrolled in school in the first place, and too many drop out or are forced into domestic service.

## Pakistan

In 1944 Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the Father of Pakistan, made a powerful statement against purdah: "No nation can rise to the height of glory unless your women are side by side with you; we are victims of evil customs. It is a crime against humanity that our women are shut up within the four walls of the houses as prisoners."

Unfortunately, Pakistan has not realized that progressive vision. Traditional ideas persist about keeping women at home and keeping them out of the workforce. When women do paid work, it tends to be piecemeal done at home. Often women's earnings are credited to their husbands.

This is changing, though. The 1981 census reported that 5.6 percent of all women did paid work, compared with 72.4 percent of men. By 1988 the number had risen to 10.2 percent. By 2005, 28 percent of women were in the labor force in some way.

The traditional preference for sons in Pakistan disadvantages girls and women at all levels. Girls have lower school-enrollment rates than boys even in the early grades. Girls have higher dropout rates, too. Female literacy is lower than for males. In some parts of the country, only 1 percent of women know how to read. Families with limited health-care resources tend to deprive their daughters to ensure care for their sons. This leads to poorer health for women.

Pakistan is not a rich country. But research by organizations like the United Nations Development Program suggests that Pakistan could do better with the resources it has if it could address inequality between the sexes in education and health care.

## Afghanistan

Even as Afghanistan stabilized after the Taliban government's ouster in 2001, women and children there faced an "acute emergency." Public health is a particular concern. Afghanistan has extremely high maternal mortality rates and infant and child mortality rates. In other words, just giving birth is a very dangerous event for Afghan women. One Afghan child in five dies before his or her fifth birthday. A visiting United Nations official reported in 2005 that girls were "particularly vulnerable" in this situation.



Fourth-grade schoolgirls eagerly participate in class in Jalalabad, Afghanistan.

Photo by Robert Harbison /  
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School enrollment for young girls in Afghanistan is among the lowest in the world.

Afghan girls and women have little opportunity for schooling. A United Nations report in 2005 said that only about 15 percent of them can read. School enrollment for young girls in Afghanistan is among the lowest in the world. Afghan girls' enrollment in secondary schools was less than 10 percent.

The human rights picture for Afghan women is also grim. According to the US State Department, police often detain women at the request of the woman's own family for *zina*. This term covers any action that defies family wishes. A woman who chooses for herself the man she wants to marry, or who runs away from home, or who leaves a husband who beats her, would be accused of *zina*. So would a woman who has sex with a man she's not married to.

Afghan police sometimes jail women who report crimes against themselves. And some women are forced to serve sentences when their husbands are convicted of crimes. And finally, the State Department found that Afghan police sometimes take women into custody to protect them from violent retaliation by their own families.

### China's One-Child Policy

One of China's more prominent issues is population size. China has more people than any other country on earth. By July 2007 it had 1.3 billion, according to the US State Department. In the 1950s the leaders of the People's Republic of China thought a large population was a good thing. It didn't take long for them to change their minds, however. The ever-growing population was adversely affecting quality of life, everything from education to housing to clean air.

"It is important to keep in mind that population stresses are everywhere apparent in China, and no more so than in its overcrowded cities where air pollution far exceeds levels permitted in [America]," said Marshall Green, former assistant secretary of State for East Asian Affairs, in a 1986 column for *The New York Times*. And as recently as early 2009, the US State Department reported that the World Health Organization found that China was home to "seven of the world's 10 most polluted cities. . . ."

These kinds of negative impacts from population growth led to a series of campaigns starting decades ago to encourage birth control. Some were more successful than others. By the early 1970s Chairman Mao became personally involved. A special group in China's State Council had charge of birth control activities around the country. Committees were set up to monitor the family status of laborers in factories and other workplaces. So-called "barefoot doctors" distributed information and contraceptives—birth control pills and devices—in the countryside.