

Afghan govt cracks down on women's shelters to please Taliban

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This is yet another sign of a conservative resurgence in the country as discussions about peace deals with the Taliban grow louder.

The Italian women's organization, CISDA - Coordinamento Italiano Sostegno Donne Afghane - denounces the draft regulation promoted by the Council of Ministers in January 2011, whose adoption allows the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) to take over the management of the existing shelters for women within 45 days, almost all of which are operated by Afghan non-governmental organizations.

The regulation comes after an early decision of the Afghan Supreme Court - the most obscurantist legislative body - according to which, seeking refuge in the shelters run by NGOs is considered a crime which abused women and girls can be prosecuted for. The Afghan Supreme Court had already limited women's freedom of appeal to the juridical bodies.

Adoption of the regulation would result in the closure of some shelters and restrictions on women's freedom: under the proposal, women seeking shelter would have to face monthly forensic examinations to monitor their sexual activity, practice and study Islam, and they will have to be accompanied to the shelters by a mahram (the husband or a male relative). The government has justified its move to take over shelters partly on the grounds that the Women's Affairs Ministry has the budget, the staff and the expertise to take on the running of the women's centers and can therefore offer sustainable long-term funding.

However, we see the effort as yet another sign of a conservative resurgence in the country as discussions about peace deals with the Taliban grow louder. For years opponents of women's rights in Afghanistan have accused the shelters of promoting prostitution and now the government has found the way to take the shelters under its control.

The regulation will have dramatic consequences for all women subjected to violence:

- No male relative, even less a husband, will ever take an abused woman to a shelter; most of the time, the male relative is the one responsible for the violence women undergo and flee from.
- In Afghanistan rape is considered a 'moral crime' and a reason for repudiation; hence, whereas the medical report gives record of sexual abuse, a woman seeking refuge in a government-run shelter would be denounced by the government itself rather than sheltered/protected.
- Once admitted to the shelter, a woman escaping forced marriage will be denounced by the government itself because running away from the family is considered a crime.
- Women and girls forcibly returned to their family or relatives have to face the community's condemnation, sometimes resulting in public lapidation - as the recent month's cases showed.

- If the family claims the woman back for any reason – even for a forced marriage – the shelter’s staff cannot refuse to release her. The vast majority of these abused women are charged with/accused of adultery by their community.

Afghanistan is one of the most corrupt countries in the world: this regulation does not guarantee that the aid given by international organizations actually ends up in the hands of the women who have been victimized.

- Karzai’s government - supported by US and NATO military occupation - has always been known for violating human rights:

- In March 2009 the Karzai government signed a law aimed at weakening Shiah women: according to this law, women cannot refuse to obey their husbands’ sexual demands and cannot go to work, to the doctor or to school without his permission.

- In March 2007, Karai’s government granted amnesty for all the crimes against humanity committed in Afghanistan during the last twenty years.

- In January 2007, the Primary Court in Balkh sentenced the Afghan journalist, Parwez Kambaskh, to death for blasphemy after his statements claiming men and women’s equality. Although Parwez has now been released, many are the journalists in Afghanistan whose freedom of expression is still extremely threatened.

- In July 2006, Karzai reintroduced the Department for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice, sadly known under the Taliban regime.

- Afghan NGOs fighting for human rights have denounced the constant pressure to legalize the informal justice system (tribal system) which allows for the lapidation of women.

And what’s the role of Italy? Between 2001 and 2011, the Italian government has invested hundreds of millions of euros in the reconstruction of the Afghan juridical system. We ask the Italian government and its political representatives, who have supported and are still funding the military intervention in Afghanistan, to show us how these monies have been allocated for the project of the reformation of the Afghan juridical system, since during the last years a growing number of laws against human rights and women’s freedom have been passed.

CISDA

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