

## medica mondiale Afghanistan



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### Background

Decades of war have almost completely destroyed Afghanistan. After the fall of the Taliban in 2001, a reconstruction process awakening hopes for a better future began. However, the path that laid ahead turned out to be hard. In spite of the efforts for peace and development up till now, the standard of living for women in Afghanistan has not improved. Quite the contrary: the rate of death of mothers in childbirth is one of the highest in the world, and around 80% of women and girls are forced into marriage, in many cases while they are still children. More than half of the female prison inmates were locked up for "moral crimes" (suspected adultery or running away from home), denied their rights, and branded by society as "bad" women. Violence and injustice are also a large part of the everyday family life in Afghanistan; living conditions that drive an exceptionally high number of young women to suicide. Many women suffer from depression, psychosomatic illnesses, and have no one to whom they can turn. For what they are experiencing and suffering is taboo.

### The work of *medica mondiale* Afghanistan

Since 2003, *medica mondiale* has been working on behalf of women and girls in Afghanistan in the scope of various projects: The local staff offer women direct psychosocial and legal aid. In addition, *medica mondiale* trains lawyers, doctors, and social workers in the professional support of Afghan women who have survived sexualized violence. *medica mondiale* is also taking an active role in the political scene for women's rights in Afghanistan. The work of the project focuses on the cities of Kabul, Herat, Mazar-e-Sharif, and Kandahar, and some of the neighboring provinces as well.

#### Psychosocial counselling and training

In six districts of Kabul, *medica mondiale* Afghanistan has set up counselling centres that offer women psychosocial aid within easy reach and a safe place to meet. The Afghan psychologists of *medica mondiale* Afghanistan also provide individual and group counselling in several shelters as well as in the hospital of Herat. The psychologists also visit and administer to the inmates of the women's prisons in Kabul and

Herat on a regular basis. The demand is great, as there is hardly any support available for traumatized women in Afghanistan. Everywhere there is a lack of qualified personnel trained to deal with survivors of violence in a sensitive manner. *medica mondiale* Afghanistan is therefore continuously training Afghan women professionals who are employed in the medical and psychosocial fields. As of today, around 340 social workers, psychologists, and midwives have been trained for their work with traumatized women.

#### Training women medical professionals

For several years now, *medica mondiale* Afghanistan has been providing intensive professional and sensitivity training to medical professionals in the Afghan health sector. Women doctors and nurses in state hospitals are trained to work with women patients who have experienced violence and trauma. Because of the stigmatization of women victims of rape or other forms of violence in Afghanistan, hardly any patients ever divulge the true cause of their troubles and injuries.



Psychologist Nafisa R. provides women with support © Lizette Potgieter/medica mondiale Afghanistan

An inappropriate treatment that fails to take the woman's special situation and burden into account can quickly lead to additional trauma for the patient. In 2006, *medica mondiale Afghanistan* initiated a biennial training course for women medical professionals for the first time. For two years, around 30 Afghan woman doctors and nurses were trained in trauma-sensitive examination and treatment methods. Since May of 2008, and additional 20 women professionals from Herat had advanced training, in which they learned to be more aware of trauma in their women patients and to act accordingly.

#### Legal aid for Afghani women and girls

Most women in Afghanistan's jails were arrested for so-called moral crimes, for example, because they ran away from home out of fear of a forced marriage or for fear of being accused of sodomy after having been raped. Some of the women may wait in detention for months for arraignment or a trial. Others never get a hearing. *medica mondiale Afghanistan* provides lawyers for women in order to ensure that they get a fair trial.

#### *medica mondiale Afghanistan's successes*

- Since 2004, more than 1,200 women have received psychosocial counselling;
- since 2003, fourteen Afghan women lawyers have received advanced training as criminal defence lawyers;
- the lawyers have thus far represented around 2,250 women in court – and in nearly 2000 of these cases they managed to get the charges against the women dropped;
- in 2007, 35 judges took part in training on the topic of marriage registration, a major step toward preventing the forced marriages of children.

This is a novelty in Afghanistan, as the principle that the accused are entitled to a defence in legal proceedings was unheard of for a long time in Afghanistan. Through interventions with legal authorities and judges and through conversations with the families, in numerous cases the *medica mondiale Afghanistan* staff members have been able to obtain a release, or a substantially lesser sentence for the women than that demanded by the state prosecutor. Since May of 2007, *medica mondiale Afghanistan* has had its own counselling centre on the premises of the Kabul women's prison, in which families and imprisoned women can work with *medica mondiale* counsellors to find ways to manage conflicts.

#### Equal rights – for women too!

*medica mondiale Afghanistan* is also taking an active role on the political level to achieve equal rights for women in Afghanistan. *medica mondiale Afghanistan* is demanding effective protection of women and girls from violence in their families as well as in public, an end to the lack of rights for women, and the prosecution of violators. Through campaigns and studies, *medica mondiale Afghanistan* is also raising public awareness of the catastrophic situation of Afghan women, is distributing information on the dramatic increase of self immolations, among other things, and educating the Afghan public about the often life-threatening consequences of forced marriages and childhood marriages. From the international community of states, especially the German government, *medica mondiale* is demanding a sustainable change of strategy in the reconstruction of Afghanistan. Peace, development, and reconstruction can only succeed if the spiral of military violence is ended, and the policy of using the military to resolve conflicts is replaced with a reinforced civil reconstruction in which women as well finally get to play a greater role.

#### A rapist goes to court

In spite of coverup attempts, threats, and avoidance manoeuvres, charges were brought against a man in Kabul in 2006 for raping a five year old girl. In close cooperation with the state prosecutor, the *medica mondiale Afghanistan* lawyers had gathered sufficient information for a legal action. The man pleaded not guilty and cited his alleged impotence. In the end, however, the evidence against him was convincing, and he was sentenced to 20 years in jail. This was a ground-breaking decision, especially in view of the still prevalent impunity for rapists in Afghanistan.

#### Funding

The projects costs for 2008 total 1 Million Euro.

**Your donation will help us in our mission in Afghanistan!**