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Women's rights: A matter of life and death

By Annemarie Paulin-Campbell

This Women's Month two situations scream out for attention: the risk to women's rights as the Taliban take control of Afghanistan and the alarming teenage pregnancy rates in South Africa.

As the United States withdrew its troops from Afghanistan, the Taliban, an extremist Islamic group, quickly took control. The previous Taliban regime 1996-2001, with its harsh application of Sharia law, gave women no rights. They were not allowed to leave their homes without a male guardian. They had to wear a full burqa in public. They were not allowed to drive a vehicle. Most significantly, they were not allowed to attend school past the age of twelve or have careers. Failure to follow the law could result in severe punishments. There are stories of women having the tops of their fingers amputated for the crime of being caught wearing nail polish. Women accused of adultery were stoned to death.

In the last 20 years, a generation of Afghan women grew up with some freedom and many were able to study and work. Now many fear a return to the oppression of the past. The Taliban leaders are saying they will respect women's rights "within Islamic law." While there is rhetoric from the Taliban of a more tolerant approach, there are already reports of women, including journalists, losing their jobs, girls' schools being closed, and images of women without burqas on shop windows being white-washed out.

Closer to home, it is disturbing to see that the Gauteng Health Department reported over 23000 teenage pregnancies between April 2020 and March 2021, with just under 1000 girls between the ages of ten and fourteen. World Vision reported that lockdown coincided with increased teenage pregnancies in sub-Saharan Africa because schools were closed, increasing opportunities for risky sexual behaviour and sexual exploitation and rape. We know that with the high rate of gender-based violence, many of these pregnancies result from rape. Teenage pregnancy has very serious consequences. Unsafe abortions and lack of prenatal care may also lead to maternal mortality. Many girls are forced to drop out of school, dramatically reducing their chances of meaningful employment and trapping them in a cycle of poverty. Where girls have been raped, that trauma will have profound emotional effects.

In some countries, the struggle for women's rights now is about equal pay for equal work. Important as that is, women's rights are still a life and death issue in some places. It is also an issue of access to education which can open doors to meaningful work and flourishing.

We have to keep speaking out. In our local context, if we can help even one teenage girl be less vulnerable to teen pregnancy by building her self-esteem, helping her understand her body and her rights, making sure she has access to transport that is safe or giving money to organisations that support teenage girls, we may make an immense difference to the lives of the next generation of adult women in our country, and to their children.

As Malala Yousafzia says, ***"One child, one teacher, one book, one pen can change the world:"***



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