

Afghanistan, Women's Health, and SDG 3

Sustainable Development Goal 3, or SDG 3, is what one might call almost all encompassing. The title of SDG 3 is “Good Health and Well-Being.” There are seventeen total Sustainable Development Goals. Think of SDG 3 as an umbrella for all of the rest of the goals. Picture it like one of those massive umbrellas, the ones that keep you completely dry but only if it's not windy and raining cats and dogs sideways. What exactly does this mean in comparison to the goals? It can be argued that Sustainable Development Goal 3 is really only achievable when most of the other goals are also achieved. So when SDG 3 is successful, you have it all, you're completely dry, but when it's raining sideways that overarching umbrella is unsuccessful in keeping you dry. This is why Sustainable Development Goal 3 is so important, but is also challenging to meet at the same time. Now the country of topic, Afghanistan. Afghanistan is a country located in Southern Asia. According to The World Bank, Afghanistan is currently classified as a low-income economy (“World Bank,” n.d.). This means the GNI per capita was \$1,135 or lower in 2022. Now, where does Afghanistan come to play in the progress of achieving Sustainable Development Goal Three? Afghanistan has their own story on their challenges with this goal. The Sustainable Development Report shows that Afghanistan's dashboard for SDG 3 is currently in the red, meaning major challenges remain. As well as for the trends, the improvements are stagnating (“Sustainable Development Report,” n.d.). To summarize this information, Afghanistan is not currently achieving SDG 3 and is not on the road to do so by 2030. Afghanistan is an extremely complicated country, and there are more ways than one that improvements could occur to attempt to achieve SDG 3. With that being said, women's health is one of the biggest threats to Afghanistan that if not improved would prohibit the country from achieving SDG 3. To address women's health and make substantial progress towards achieving

Sustainable Development Goal 3, there needs to be improvements in health care access and resources for women, availability of work for women, and interventions for their mental health.

It would be an inservice to the women and people of Afghanistan to not explain and give some context for the reasons why Afghanistan is in the state it is in today. Throughout the past decades Afghanistan has been in political turmoil. This turmoil has affected and killed many. As well as, it has completely impacted all aspects of the social determinants of health for the citizens of Afghanistan. To put it briefly, Afghanistan won independence from Britain in 1921, and in 1934 the United States formally recognized Afghanistan. There was a brief time the country experimented in increased democracy, but this was short lived. In 1996 following coup d'etats, a communist counter coup d'etat, civil wars, and many events in between, the capital city of Afghanistan, Kabul, fell to the Taliban. In 2001, after 9/11, The United States with other allies attacked the Taliban for hiding Osama Bin Laden. After this, a UN-sponsored conference established a system for attempting political reconstruction in Afghanistan. In the following years they held elections and elected presidents, but amping up again in 2010, there began to be more turmoil, death, and fighting. This ultimately led to the US and the Taliban's agreement of withdrawing international forces in exchange for commitments on counterterrorism. Then in 2021, the Taliban took control of Afghanistan once again declaring themselves the government. The Taliban's current leader is Akhunzada, who uses military force to dictate the citizens of Afghanistan while acting as a totalitarian emirate ("A Historical Timeline," 2021). So, how has this impacted the health of the women of Afghanistan? To put it frankly, women's health has declined monumentally because of the Taliban. The Taliban have set draconian restrictions on women and have created gender apartheid. The following is a list of things women are banned from: working for international or nongovernmental organizations, working in government

offices, traveling out of the country without a male family member, co-education with males, education past the secondary level, public parks and sightseeing, access to certain healthcare, access to contraceptives, participation in certain media and sports, and showing their faces in public (“Tracking the Taliban’s,” 2023). Although not all of those restrictions are directly related to health, for example the Taliban didn’t say women can’t have cough medicine, all of the restrictions do fall under health, education, and economy. Health, education, and economy are all heavily interconnected. These three topics are codependent of each other and their effects intertwine ultimately making all of those restrictions relate back to health. This is why these restrictions and horrific lives the Taliban have been forcing the women to live have been so detrimental to their health. Women’s health has to be improved in Afghanistan in order to even attempt to accomplish Sustainable Development Goal 3.

It is unreasonable to base this argument off of fixing the political unrest in Afghanistan because that is out of our control, but there are ways to combat the effects the Taliban have on women’s health which would lead to improving the chances of achieving SDG 3. One way to improve women's health is to improve health care access and resources. This may seem like a blanket statement, but it is true. According to the Canadian Medical Association Journal, if a female physician is not present, women and children will be denied care no matter the circumstance. The journal estimates that there are only 10-15 female physicians still practicing in Afghanistan (Mendes, 2001). This estimate was made by a RAWA member. RAWA stands for Revolutionary Associations of the Women of Afghanistan. RAWA was founded in Kabul in 1977, and their members risk their own safety to aid the sick and teach home health to women. This is what Afghanistan needs more of to improve the health of women. Additional funding to organizations like RAWA could improve the lives of many women. Home health is likely the

only option for many women, and an increase in home health education is vital. Another idea could be educating the women on a holistic approach to healthcare because this could be an easier alternative to teach at home. In the journal Amowitz, a Physician for Human Rights, stated that “The overall ban on education for women has created an abyss in health care” (Mendes, 2001). This also correlates with the decreasing maternal mortality rates in Afghanistan which alone is one of the targets of SDG 3. Maternal mortality rates had been improving, but after the Taliban took over control again, the progress has been lost. Between not being able to afford care and the restrictions, many women get no healthcare which can lead to their death. To really put this into perspective, sometimes the women are so malnourished they cannot produce breast milk for their newborn babies. This leaves them to put tea in their bottles to feed babies only 7 days old. Child marriage is also now on the rise which leads to early pregnancy. This also creates many risk factors that are potentially contributing to the maternal mortality rates (Dawi, 2023). These are all reasons why increased education, resources, and access to health care would significantly improve women's health.

Next improving women's health means increasing their income and jobs available to them. Right now women can do next to nothing. This means they have little money for health needs. Also because of the education ban, they probably have a lack of education making it harder for them to obtain a job if the opportunity was even given to them. Let these facts sink in. On August 10, 2022, women were removed from their flight attendant jobs. On December 24, 2022, women were banned from working in international nongovernmental organizations. On December 27, 2022, women-run bakeries were banned in Kabul (“Tracking the Taliban’s,” 2023). Those are only some examples. Women need more options for making an income in order to support themselves and their children. In spite of the Taliban and their rules,

international efforts should be made to aid these women like humanitarian efforts to aid women on how to cultivate and sustain ways to provide for themselves. Or, efforts to help build a bartering system for women could also realistically help. If women were taught how to make different necessities and then they could all trade with each other some problems could be eliminated. Having the necessities of everyday life would definitely improve the health of women. With that being said women need money to be able to afford healthcare, this is one reason why women's health is a current crisis. Potential collaboration with the Taliban to create more jobs or international help for women to work needs to happen to improve their health.

Interventions for women and their mental health are extremely important in Afghanistan right now. One of the targets for SDG 3 even directly states promoting mental health. From BMJ Journals, a study was conducted on depression and anxiety in Afghan women living under the Taliban in urban areas. The study was conducted with a pretested questionnaire. The results concluded overwhelming statistics. The data showed that the prevalence of depressive symptoms among the women who participated was 80.4%, and the prevalence of mild to severe anxiety was 81.0%. The study goes on to conclude that the prevalence of depression and anxiety takes a toll on Afghan women's overall quality of life. The study suggests international health organizations should administer regular screenings for anxiety and depression. As well as, there should be psychological counseling available (Nayazi et al., 2023). These are two substantial options for combating the mental health struggles that the Taliban have induced on the women. International organizations could also offer a version of a support group for women to be heard and gather together. Organizations could also send aid like journals to the Afghan women. A 22 year old named Maryam Rezaei, who lives in Kabul, said this is how she felt, "I have lost everything that I have worked for and all of my goals...It makes me lose my temper. I feel like

an empty shell of a human being. I am in captivity and I am just waiting for my death.”

(Synovitz, 2021). Mental health is a big part of overall health, and these women are facing interpersonal violence and trauma on a day to day basis. From the Sustainable Development Report, an indicator of SDG 3 is subjective well-being. Afghanistan lands at a score of 1.3 out of 10 (“Sustainable Development Report,” n.d.). In order to progress in SDG, women’s health needs to be addressed. Change needs to occur.

Is it now more clear why Sustainable Development Goal 3 can be considered an umbrella? SDG 3, Good Health and Well-Being, covers so many important factors and without achieving this goal it would be extremely difficult to accomplish many of the other SDGs. In order for Afghanistan to have a fighting chance in succeeding at SDG 3 by 2030, women’s health needs substantial improvements. To make meaningful progress in achieving SDG 3, the Afghan women need and deserve improvements in health care access and resources, job and income opportunities, and interventions for their mental health. It is of utmost importance these women are allocated with resources, funding, and programs to meet their needs to better their health. To attempt to put their situation in perspective, put yourself in their shoes. You’re a recently widowed Afghan woman. You can’t leave the house because you don’t have a burqa. You don’t have a burqa because you can no longer afford one. You can’t afford one because there are so many bans on what jobs you can obtain. Even if you could get a job, you don’t have an education. If you have no job, no money, and little education. How do you think your health would be? Lastly, in the Book Mountains Beyond Mountains Jim Kim says, “...the only time that I hear talk of shrinking resources...is when we talk about things that have to do with poor people” (Kidder, 2003). These women need the resources. If there are still doubts, read the personal stories written by Afghan women on AfterAugust.org, because they deserve to be heard.

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